



SKELETON IN KNIGHT ANOTHER WORLD

WRITTEN BY Ennki Hakari
ILLUSTRATED BY KeG

X



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Deel

Brad

“C’mon,
let’s put
those away.”

SKELETON
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ANOTHER WORLD

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written by Ennki Hakari

illustrated by KeG



Ariane

Arc

Ponta

Chiyome

"I don't think it
sounds quite right.
What about
'Verdant Meadow
Ponta Patrol'?"

"What about the
'Twilight Cottontail
Foxes'?"

"All right then.
How about the
'Turbulent Ponta
Patrol'?"

WHADDYA CALLING YOUR MERCENARY GROUP?



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrations by KeG

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Human Kingdoms



Domitianus

Wildly ambitious emperor of the Holy East Revlon Empire with a distinguished military background.



Riel

Young Nohzan Kingdom Princess who does whatever it takes to fulfill her role as a member of the royal family.



Uuriarna

Princess of the Rhoden Kingdom who strives to mend the relationship between elves and humans.



Sekt

Prince of the Rhoden Kingdom who is secretly being backed by the Great West Revlon Empire.

Great Canada Forest



Fangas

Ariane's grandfather and high elder of the Great Canada Forest.



Eevin

Ariane's doting older sister. She wields power over water and wind magic through her spirit covenant.



Glenys

Ariane's mother may seem like a simple, carefree homemaker, but she's a top-tier fighter.



Dillan

Ariane's father, who takes a laid-back approach to his role as the elder of Lalatoya Village.

Others



Elin

One of Hilk church's seven cardinals, where she goes by her given name, Castitas.



Villiers Fim

One of the Dragon Lords. Lazies about the Lord Crown near Arc's home base.



Felfi Visrotte

One of the Dragon Lords. She has watched over the elves for one thousand years.



Goemon

One of six great Jinshin clan warriors, this silent and stoic fighter uses earth techniques.

Skeleton Knight in Another World

Characters

Main



Ariane

A dark elf warrior from the forest capital of Maple. She excels on the battlefield through her swordsmanship, as well as the fire and earth magic granted to her through her spirit covenant.



Arc

A man who was transported into another world in the form of his skeleton knight avatar. He has access to the skills from the ten classes he mastered in game.



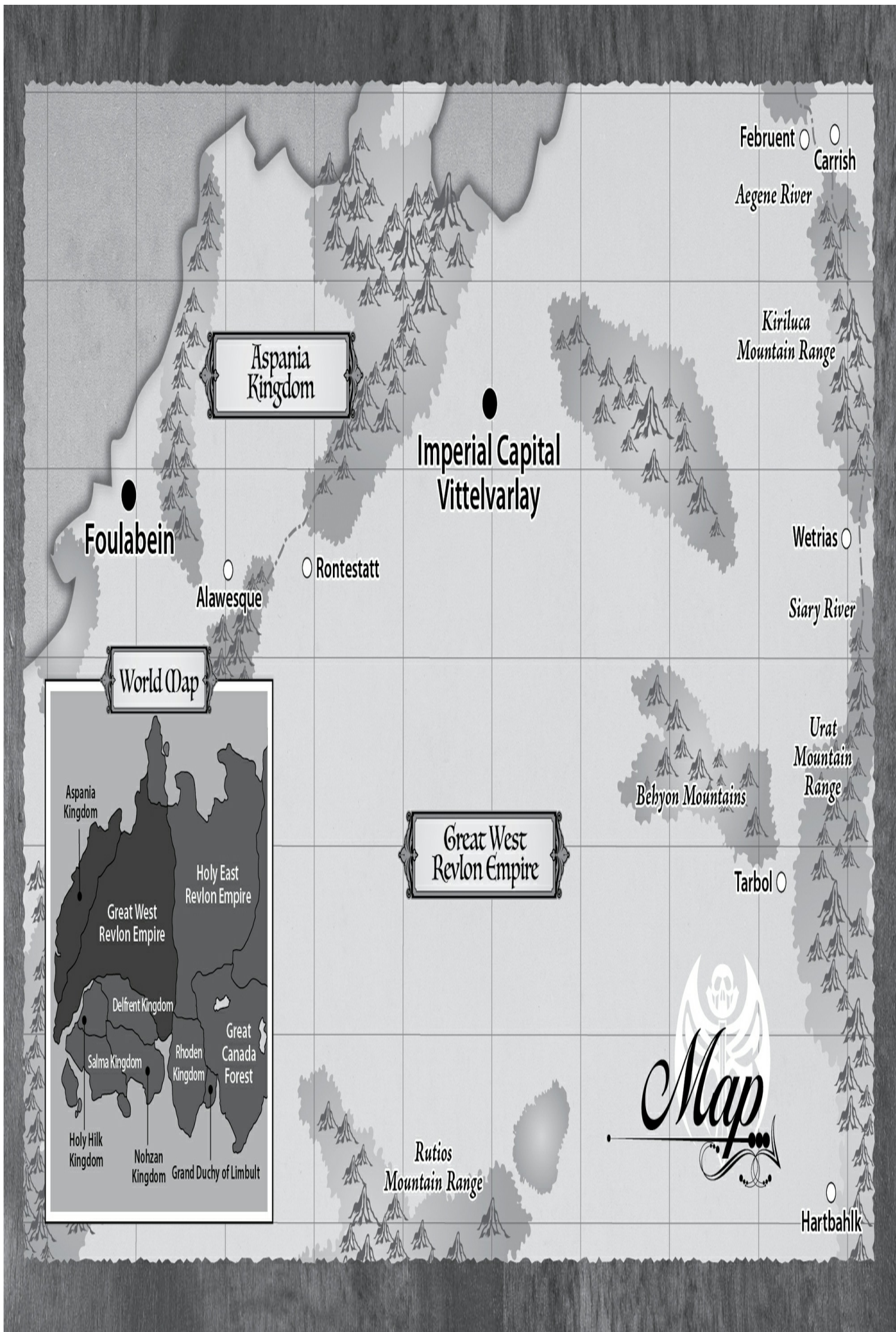
Ponta

A spirit creature known as a ventu vulpis (cottontail fox). Ponta has been along for the ride ever since being saved by Arc.



Chiyome

A cat girl who specializes in water magic. One of the six great warriors of the Jinshin clan—secret spies who once served the Revlon Empire.



Prologue

THE SIANA MOUNTAIN RANGE ran along to the northwest, its peaks obscured beneath a thick layer of dark gray rain clouds and the heavy rainfall pouring from them. A densely wooded forest stretched from the base of the mountains, the trees graciously accepting the oncoming rain as it streamed across their leaves and branches, forming tiny waterfalls that fell to the forest floor below.

A massive city sat in the midst of this orchestral forest: Tisheng.

This city had once belonged to the Great Revlon Empire, the imperial power located on the western side of the continent, before falling to its eastern neighbor, the Holy Revlon Empire, a month prior. Things had settled down slightly since the anxious days shortly after the new power took hold, and the city now sat mostly silent, thanks in no small part to the steady rainfall over the past few days.

Despite the heavy rains, armed eastern imperial soldiers continued to stand watch around the city and keep an eye out for any suspicious changes. Not only was this newly subjugated territory, but there was also an important dignitary present.

Little was heard, other than the echoes of rainfall, at the center of Tisheng, where the estate of the previous lord was located. The buildings had since been taken over and given to the commanders in charge of planning the invasion into the west. The young man currently sitting in an intricately carved chair in what had once been the previous owner's study, gazing up at the thick dark clouds, was none other than Emperor Domitianus Revlon Valtiafelbe.

He had a stark face topped with mussy reddish-brown hair haphazardly tied back into a loose ponytail. With his lanky frame draped in military attire, the man hardly looked like a typical emperor. However, the glimmer in his gray eyes hinted at an inner strength capable of boring straight through those in his presence. That, combined with the oppressive atmosphere he created within the room, made it clear this man was none other than the emperor himself.

Emperor Domitianus slowly turned his gaze from the window to the ceiling, a

small sigh escaping his sharply curled lips. The commander in charge of dispensing orders to all subordinate forces stood stock-still behind the young man, a chill running down his spine as the air blew past his lips. Cold rivulets of sweat ran down his neck as he cleared his throat.

“It’s been a month since Tisheng fell. Though you’ve managed to bring the surrounding domains under our control, we find ourselves making no progress toward subjugating Port Bulgoh down to the south. What pray tell, have my Monster Corps been doing with our armies since the fall of Tisheng?”

Though he spoke calmly, the white-hot anger contained within the emperor’s words caused the commander to immediately drop down into a deep bow. His voice shook as he began to speak.

“Please allow me to offer my apologies. The Monster Corps that were added to supplement our attacking forces were of immense help during the initial attack and contributed greatly to the downfall of the surrounding lands. However, we’ve been seeing gaps form in our frontlines as we continue to press forward, with each of the different monsters under our control progressing at different speeds, breaking down from a large battalion into individual squads. What’s more, supplying these monster squads is becoming a great burden, and the constant drain further hinders the progress of our troops.”

The commander swallowed hard and paused after making his report, if it could be called as much. It was more an indictment of the Monster Corps, which the emperor himself had insisted on adding to their forces, than of the current war situation .

Were his report to upset the emperor and invite his bad graces, the commander knew his very life could be in danger. Unfair as it might seem, this was the fate that befell any commoner who stood before royalty in this world. The man’s expression was neutral, as if he had accepted his fate.

However, despite the commander’s concerns, Emperor Domitianus merely raised an eyebrow, re-crossed his legs, and stroked his chin in thought.

“Hmm, I see. We conducted many trial runs prior to inserting the Monster Corps into actual combat. The issue was raised that we hadn’t observed them during long marches, which is what we were putting them into. I suppose trials

are ultimately just that, and nothing more.”

The messenger relaxed at the emperor’s demeanor. At the same time, he was reminded that the young emperor had not attained his role merely through status, and felt a surge of excitement for the future progress of the empire.

“If we continue to press on, we might fight ourselves on shaky ground. In that case, we may be best served by having the Monster Corps fall back to Tisheng and reform the groups to ensure they can produce results on the battlefield in the future. We prioritized sheer numbers in the past, but going forward, we may want to evaluate restricting which types of monsters are assigned to a given task.”

As Domitianus reached his conclusion, he once again focused his sharp, gray eyes on the commander before him.

“You hear me? Have the Monster Corps retreat to the rear. Order their leaders to evaluate the suitability of each monster, and give me their thoughts on combat tactics based on their observations on the field. I also want you to tell them to call up the troops who served under these regional lords, and look into ways to reinforce our front lines after the retreat.”

The commander tensed up, clicked his heels together, and brought his fist to his chest upon hearing his orders.

“Understood! I will disseminate your message to all regions without delay!”

He turned on his heel and walked swiftly from the room, the sound of his footsteps only increasing in speed the moment he was out of sight.

Domitianus listened to the echoes of the footfalls as he leaned back into his chair and gazed up at the ceiling. He spoke aloud to himself as he considered his strategy going forward.

“I wanted to put additional pressure on the domains between us and Port Bulgoh, but spending a little time reinforcing our base is the better strategy. Fortunately, time is on our side. It will be a nearly impossible task to get all of the nobles to the west to move in concert, what with the issues in Aspania at their back and the chaos in the home of the Hilk church to the south.”

As he glanced toward the doorway, he suddenly became aware of the sound

of footfalls as someone approached the room. The sounds stopped at the doorway and Domitianus responded before the visitor had a chance to speak.

“Enter.”

A chamberlain opened the door in response.

Emperor Domitianus glanced at the papers in the man’s hands and guessed at the contents of the report awaiting him. He gave a nod to the servant to begin his report before resting his chin in his hand.

The servant looked down at the papers and began to read.

“I am here to report on the supply route between Kaysehk and Tisheng that we are carving through the forests at the base of the Siana mountains. Your recommendation to send troops of monsters to support the deforestation efforts has shown great success, and the route is now 20 percent complete.”

Upon hearing the report, Domitianus narrowed his eyes.

The Siana mountain range, and the monster-infested forests that surrounded its base, served as both a giant wall separating the dual empires as well as the demarcation line for their national borders. But now, with the invasion into the Great Revlon Empire and subsequent fall of Tisheng, those very forests were now getting in his way. In order to solidify the beachhead that Tisheng was to become, Domitianus planned to cut a route through the forest to link up with the city of Kaysehk back in his own empire. However, due to all the monsters lurking in the woods, it required a large amount of manpower, money, and time to clear the way. It had been Domitianus’ suggestion, subsequently implemented, to dispatch some of the monster corps to the task in order to greatly reduce the time needed.

Judging by the look on the emperor’s face, the servant’s report did not meet his superior’s expectations.

“Twenty percent is a resounding success? That’s hardly what I’d been hoping to hear. I assume my order—countermanding the original directive of making a route wide enough for two lanes of horse-drawn carts, to make it wide enough only for a single horse-drawn cart—has already been passed along, yes?”

The servant nodded.

“Of course. Were it not for the man-eating ogres assigned to the task, we would likely only be around 10 percent of the way through the task. When the ogres were first assigned, the people overseeing the monster corps were not accustomed to this kind of preparatory work. We’ve received reports that it took them a bit of trial and error, but they are now slowly improving and showing results. We should hit the 30 percent mark any day now. From what I’ve heard from those in charge, they anticipate being able to pick up speed going forward.”

This report elicited a wry laugh from the emperor, his lips contorting into a smile.

The man-eating ogres were humanoid monsters that stood a little over two meters tall. They were known for being well-muscled—several times stronger than a normal human—and marked by their ruddy brown skin, single horns growing from knobs on their foreheads, and large fangs sprouting from their lower jaws. They were just barely intelligent enough to make simple tools out of stone.

Even with the ‘employ ring’ developed by the empire to give them control over monsters, this kind of deforestation work was likely quite a struggle for creatures with such low intelligence.

Domitianus chuckled and shook his head in annoyance as he considered his own imprudence, imagining the soldiers working tirelessly on the construction site to train the beasts.

“Sounds like I’ve put them through a lot. Give the men working on the route clearing a celebratory drink in my name. Based on the current improvements in speed, how long will it take us to break through?”

The servant flipped through his papers once again.

“We only have rough estimates, but we should be able to open a simple transportation route within the next six months. It will likely take around a year to expand it to match the city roads, but we estimate that we may be able to halve that time in light of current progress.”

Domitianus beamed at this.

“That’s perfectly fine. Once we’ve secured a route between Kaysehk and Tisheng, we’ll be able to put pressure on the southern territories from here. The only issue is whether the west will make a move prior to us breaking through the forest. It would certainly be to our benefit for Aspania to cause some kind of trouble.”

The servant nodded in agreement with the emperor’s assessment.

“We’ve received no reports from our spies in the west about any notable movement from Aspania. Even if they were attempting to act in secret, we would certainly have heard *something*.”

Domitianus spun his chair around to look back out the window, narrowing his gaze as he focused on something in the distance.

“All that’s left to do is let things happen as they may and bide our time. Keep me abreast of all reports from our spies.”

The servant confirmed his master’s order and bowed his head once before hurriedly leaving the room. Emperor Domitianus listened to the fading footfalls, silvery glare trained on the thick, dark rain clouds traversing overhead.

Chapter 1:

A Professional Mercenary...Take Two

THE FOREST WAS FILLED with trees that shot straight up into the sky. So massive were their trunks that it would take at least a dozen people holding hands to encircle them entirely, and you'd have to crane your neck painfully just to see their tops. Each of these massive towers was topped with large branches and leaves that almost entirely blotted out the sky. Monsters roamed free in the silent underbrush of the forest, making for an environment wholly uninviting to intruders.

This forest, located in the southeast of the northern continent, was known as the Great Canada Forest. While it kept most people out, further in its depths existed numerous villages created by the elves, a race driven into the forests by human persecution. This was now what the majority of elves located on the northern continent called home.

Lalatoya was one such village located within the Great Canada Forest. The elves there lived in a collection of dwellings located behind a massive, undulating wall of wooden pillars, placed there to keep away the dangerous monsters inhabiting the forest. Lalatoya's village elder lived in a mysterious dwelling—a tree that was massive in its own right, though not quite as large as the giants that stood tall in the forest. The house, which was a fusion of nature and artifice, consisting of a mixture of real trees and elf-made structures, would have looked nothing short of bizarre to any human. But under the flitters of light that made their way through the expansive leaf cover, it was like something straight out of a fairytale.

Despite the early hour and the mists still hanging low on the forest floor, a figure that stood over two meters in height was bustling away in one of the rooms inside.

This immense figure was outfitted from head to toe in full plate armor with white and blue etchings. His fluttering cloak was so dark it looked like it had been ripped straight out of the night sky. On his back was a round shield carved

with intricate runes, and a massive, glowing blade nearly as tall as him was strapped to his back.

Resting atop the knight's armor was no human head, however, but a porcelain white skull. Deep in the inky blackness of his eye cavities was a flittering blue flame that hinted at a soul.

Though it had been a while since I came to this world, and I felt I'd mostly gotten used to my appearance, I still sometimes suffered quite a shock when catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Figuring I could give someone quite a fright if they unwittingly entered the room and spied me, I took my extravagant helmet—made of glimmering silver—from the desk in both hands and placed it atop my head, making slight adjustments as I went. This should cover me up.

After checking the fit, I mumbled absently to myself, "That should take care of that."

Almost as if summoned by my words, I saw a fuzzy shape moving out of my peripheral vision.

"Kyii!"

A small, green-furred animal let out an adorable cry that echoed throughout the room. Standing at about 60 centimeters—half of which was its long, cotton-like tail—it looked like a cross between a Japanese flying squirrel and a fox, but had a thin membrane that ran between its front and hind legs. It tilted its head up and I focused my gaze right on its large, round eyes.

"I see you're awake, Ponta?"

"Kyii!"

Ponta, as I'd named it, was an incredibly rare breed known in this world as a spirit animal, able to utilize the magical powers of the spirit residing within it. I saved Ponta from some bandits who had injured and captured it in the hopes of selling it, and we'd been together ever since, like traveling companions on a great journey together.

Ponta smiled and rubbed its head back against my palm as I gently stroked the soft, green fur atop its head. We were headed somewhere incredibly dangerous today, but it was clear from the way Ponta was acting that it fully

intended to come along.

“I guess you want to join me, huh?”

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

Of course, it would be much safer to stay here in the elven village. But before I could even get the words out, Ponta let out a loud mew and summoned up a magical breeze around itself, as if to shoot my suggestion down. The thin curtains at the window fluttered in the wind created by Ponta’s magic as the fox caught the gust against the membrane between its limbs and deftly rose into the air. Ponta glided easily around the small room before landing atop my helmet and grabbing on tight to secure its position.

“Kyii!”

It didn’t seem like it was willing to give in. I reached back and stroked the long tail running down the back of my head with a finger, letting out a sigh, before turning my attention to an item laying haphazardly atop the desk at the periphery of my vision.

It was a crystal-like jewel about the size of a baby’s fist, marked by several intricate magical runes etched deep within it that each emitted a faint light. This item, once believed to have been in the possession of the leader of the Hilk religion, Pontiff Thanatos, and the bizarre monsters working under him—his cardinals—was known as a transportation stone, a magical implement possessing the power of teleportation magic.

However, this teleportation magic could only be used once. While I’d had an elf who specialized in magical artifacts inspect the item for me, they were unable to determine where it would teleport its user, and I hadn’t risked using it yet. However, considering that I could use teleportation magic on my own without needing to rely on any magical items, I’d been asked to see where the teleportation stone would take me, since I could easily return regardless of where I ended up.

In total, there were seven Cardinals serving under Pontiff Thanatos. As far as I could tell, I had only taken out five. The other two had managed to elude us since the assault on the Hilk Kingdom, and this teleportation stone was likely the only clue we had to their whereabouts. Though they usually maintained

their human forms when in the cities, it was troubling to know that these creatures—which could transform into monsters that could wipe out entire armies on a whim—were lurking somewhere out there. Normal humans would stand no chance against them.

That was why I was going to use this transportation stone to try to follow the cardinals' trail. If I was successful, and had a chance to wipe them out, I would destroy the cardinals before they could come back for us.

Of course, the world was a vast, vast place and the odds of everything going as planned were low.

I slid the transportation stone into the item pouch hanging from my waist. With my preparations complete, I took one last look around the room to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything before sliding silently out the door and into the hallway. I walked slowly and steadily, trying to avoid making a sound, but suddenly heard a voice call out to me from behind.

"And where do you think you're going this early in the morning, Arc?"

Unconsciously perking up at the sound of my name, I quickly turned to see two people standing there behind me.



One of the figures was that of a female dark elf, daughter to Lalatoya's village elder. She wore her long, snow-white hair—a mark of the dark elves—in a ponytail from under which her pointed ears peeked, and her skin had a nearly translucent amethyst hue to it, though much of her supple limbs were covered by a robe marked by an elven crest. She fixed me with an unimpressed golden gaze.

I looked her up and down as I spoke. "Oh, uh, Ariane. Wh-why are you all dressed up like that?"

The dark elven warrior's gaze hardened slightly in response to my reaction, almost as if she could sense my surprised expression through my helmet. She usually wore the light traditional elven garments when out and about in the village, but today, there was a charcoal-gray cloak draped over her shoulders and a longsword engraved with lions at her waist. It was clear that she, like myself, was dressed for going on a journey.

A teasing smile rolled across her lips as she picked up on what I was thinking.

"You were thinking you'd just go investigate the transportation stone on your own, weren't you?"

My voice rose slightly in surprise at that. "You saw right through me?"

She was right. Since I only intended to see where the transportation stone took me and gather some information, I'd figured I could do it alone, planning to slip out on my own first thing in the morning. Dillan, the village elder, had come directly to me with this task. I saw no reason to go out of my way to recruit people to accompany me.

Next to speak was the petite young girl standing at Ariane's side. "Do you know how to use the transportation stone, Arc?"

The young girl was dressed in all-black ninja attire with gauntlets on her arms, a dagger at her waist, and a dull gray metal band around her forehead. Two black, furry cat ears sat atop her head and a long tail wagged back and forth from her waist. She was one of the cat people who lived in the mountains. More specifically, she was a member of the ninja group known as the Jinshin clan, comprising six of the most elite warriors and renowned for their skills.

I shot a glance toward the item pouch dangling from my waist, where the transportation stone resided and suddenly realized that no one had taught me how to use it.

“Now that you mention it, Chiyome, I hadn’t actually asked.”

I absentmindedly scratched my head and chuckled slightly. Chiyome looked over at me and her usually stoic face softened slightly.

The stone looked like little more than a decorative jewel, after all, and I couldn’t find anything on it that looked like a switch. The magical items used in this world, imbued with inexplicable power, were completely unlike anything from the science-based society I had lived in until recently. When playing a game, I would just select an item and execute the Use command. Unfortunately, the real world provided thousands upon thousands of different ways to actually utilize any given item or object.

I let out a sigh and looked at the two figures joining me in the hallway. “I have no idea where this will take me, so I thought that I would scout ahead on my own.”

Ponta propped itself up atop my head as I shrugged my shoulders. “Kyii!”

It was like it was trying to insist that I wasn’t alone. While I reached up to stroke Ponta’s tail, Ariane and Chiyome shot me exasperated glances. Ariane leaned in closer as she began to press her point.

“Listen, Arc, you’re already a member of this village. So stop acting so aloof. Finding the Cardinals isn’t just important for all of Canada’s sake, but also for the mountain people and even some of the human kingdoms. Of course we’re going with you.”

Chiyome nodded emphatically at Ariane’s statement. Her blue eyes narrowed slightly.

“Besides, if we’re going to investigate the place it takes us to, I’ll be a great help. You’ve done a lot for my people, Arc. Hanzo would almost certainly not want me to stand by if I could be of some use.”

My chances of making a quiet exit were looking low. Under normal circumstances, it would have been best to leave these two behind in light of the

dangers of teleporting to an unknown place, but these women were quite powerful... Far more than me, even. While I relied on status buffs to attack with raw power, these two were something else entirely in terms of their immense skill sets. So much so, in fact, that it was absurd for me to worry about them. What was more, considering all the adventures the three of us (and our spirit animal companion) had been on, it was clear we'd be a lot stronger together than if I traveled alone.

Ariane backed up what Chiyome had said. "Besides, I'd be overwhelmed with worry if we sent you and Ponta off to conduct this investigation alone."

With a sigh, she narrowed her golden eyes and fixed them on me. Judging by the way she was looking at me, I had a hard time believing she was worried for my well being.

Ah well. Given all the trouble I'd managed to get myself into since coming to this world, she probably had misgivings about all the trouble I might go *on* to cause. Of course, I'd already accepted that that was probably unavoidable, considering the unique nature of the task at hand.

"Well, personally, I'd find it reassuring to have you two along. Perhaps we should speak with Dillan to get his permission."

Once I finished speaking, Ariane quickly averted her gaze to look over my shoulder at something behind me. Following her gaze, I found a dark elf woman standing behind me with her arms crossed.

"So it's decided? In that case, you best eat a hearty breakfast and then get on your way."

The gently smiling woman dressed in traditional elven attire looked barely older than Ariane, though this was due to the fact that elves aged very slowly. Her name was Glenys: wife to elder Dillan and Ariane's mother. Under that warm, inviting exterior was a master swordsman and Ariane's teacher. She was so skilled that neither Ariane nor Chiyome stood a chance against her, and truth be told, neither did I.

Glenys shot a cheerful glance in my direction, almost as if she had picked up on what I was thinking. I immediately tensed up under her gaze. She had been helping me practice swordplay whenever we had a free moment, but a side

effect of constantly being on the receiving end of her fierce assaults was that my body reflexively grew tense when she was around.

According to Ariane, this conditioned reflex, built up through battle, was a good indication that the training was working. If that were true, it meant all the intense, muddy training sessions we'd gone through were paying off.

I turned to Glenys and bowed my head slightly.

"Good morning, Glenys. I think I would like to take you up on your kind offer and have some breakfast before heading out. I take it you've already eaten, Ariane?"

"Kyii!"

Ponta's tail wagged excitedly from its perch atop my helmet, seeming set off by the mention of breakfast, as I glanced at Ariane and Chiyome.

"Not yet. We were busy getting our things ready."

Ariane clenched her jaw to fight a yawn and stretched her limbs as she made her way toward the dining room downstairs. Chiyome followed immediately behind her.

I'd initially planned to skip breakfast so I could slip out unnoticed, but I had to concede that Glenys was right and that it would be better to start the journey on a full stomach and in good health. As I made my way downstairs, the delicious scent of bread grew ever stronger, making me forget for a moment that the skeletal body beneath my armor lacked a stomach. I rubbed my hands together in anticipation.

First things first—let's eat up.

After eating and making our way out of the house, we found that the early morning mist had burned away and the village was brilliantly illuminated by the slivers of light that made their way through the foliage. I glanced up at the white clouds being carried by the gentle breeze across the sky.

"I guess we took a bit too long to eat, huh."

Ariane, her charcoal-gray hood pulled down over her head to conceal her

elven ears and amethyst skin, narrowed her eyebrows. “What does it matter? Our investigation is just starting. We need to use that transportation stone and see where it leads us if we want to chase down the Cardinal. Until we do that, we can’t even start planning.”

Chiyome, a hat pulled down low to cover her cat ears and her tail well hidden, nodded in agreement. “She’s right. We need to find out where it takes us, and then find a distinct location so you can use your teleportation magic to teleport us back there any time.”

“I guess so.”

I nodded slowly as the conversation we’d had over breakfast suddenly came back to my mind. It was just a theory, but if we assumed these transportation stones were meant to be used by the Cardinals to make a sudden escape, they likely led to a human settlement. Though they were in fact disturbing creatures, the Cardinals could assume the form of humans. A human city would provide the best opportunity for them to use this ability to hide themselves.

After all, there was no place better than a forest to hide a tree.

However, though they could change their appearance, they could only fool the human eye. The Cardinals were all undead created at the will of Pontiff Thanatos, the ruler of the Holy Hilk Kingdom. Though they might look like normal humans, the elves could still see the contamination of death upon them, while the mountain people, using their acute olfactory senses, could smell the scent of death emanating from them.

All of this meant that the Cardinals would probably limit their escape routes to towns that were populated by humans and didn’t see much traffic from other species like Ariane and Chiyome. In fact, perhaps to conceal the true identities of the Cardinals, Pontiff Thanatos proselytized all of the kingdoms surrounding the Holy Hilk Kingdom, making it law and doctrine to expel all the elves and mountain people from their territories. Anyone who could see through the Pontiff’s undead charges’ disguise was a nuisance.

However, this meant there was a definite risk of the dark elf Ariane and the cat girl Chiyome sticking out or even being put on the slave auction block if we did end up traveling to such human settlements. Prey could easily escape its

hunters if those hunters stood out like a sore thumb themselves, which was why my comrades were dressed as they were.

Another entirely different possibility was that we would be teleported to a safe house far from any other settlements—a natural construction somewhere deep in a forest or cave, or maybe a hut built far from prying eyes in the mountains. If we were lucky, we might just run into the Cardinal who'd teleported there. If we weren't, however, it would be difficult to find a unique landmark to use as our starting point.

Out here in this vast world with neither GPS nor a proper map, we had no way of knowing where we were without a landmark. I needed a point of reference to use my teleportation magic to get to a place, and in areas where everything looked the same—like forests or caves—it was hard to maintain a distinct and usable image for my magic to focus on. If that happened, Ariane and Chiyome would prove invaluable partners not just for their fighting prowess, but because they'd spent their lives living in forests and mountains.

I'd only really thought about this task on a surface level. It wasn't until we started talking about our plan over breakfast that I truly realized just how difficult it would have been to complete on my own.

If I did ultimately end up in a place like the latter option, it would be pretty tough for a person with a poor sense of direction, such as myself, to find my way back there a second time after using my teleportation magic to return to the village. Considering that Ariane and Chiyome weren't just better fighters than me but also far more gifted at conducting searches, I was pretty much relegated to the role of casting somewhat useful magic spells. It was a little depressing, really.

Sensing the dejected slump in my shoulders, Ponta craned down from its perch atop my helmet to peer at me through the gap, its head cocked curiously to the side.

"Kyii?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

With a shake of my head, I straightened up and looked around at my surroundings.

We were in the garden behind the house, where I usually trained with Glenys. We'd decided to use the transportation stone here in the hopes that no one else would get pulled in along with us. A man and a woman—Glenys and her husband and village elder, Dillan—stood off in a corner of the garden, watching over us. Unlike his dark elf wife, Dillan was a normal elf. He had nearly translucent white skin, green-streaked golden hair, and long pointed ears.

I bowed slightly toward the two, who had come to see us off, before pulling the transportation stone out of my pouch and rolling it around in the palm of my hand. The runes etched deep in its core reflected the rays of light cascading through the trees above.

“I guess it's time we get going.”

I glanced to my sides where Ariane and Chiyome were waiting, packed and ready to go. They simply nodded in silent agreement.

Dillan had previously taught me how to use this magical item. I slowly let out my breath, squeezed the stone in my hand, and slammed it into the ground. A loud, crisp crack resounded from the transportation stone before it shattered, its shards spreading out over the ground.

It was a pretty violent way to do things, but the moment it hit the ground, the magical runes etched within the stone began to glow. The light spread to the ground below, then extended in rays toward the sky.

“Wow...”

“Looks like it worked.”

“The area of effect isn't as large as I thought it'd be.”

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

I was at a loss for words as I gazed at the effect, which differed slightly from my own teleportation magic. Ariane and Chiyome's eyes were wide, and Ponta excitedly leaned forward from atop my helmet.

Everything around us went black. The next instant, we were suddenly overtaken by the dizzying feeling of flowing through thin air as the world around us changed.

“Where are...?”

I brought a hand to my head to steady myself as I glanced around, trying to get a sense of our surroundings. We were in some kind of old, rundown estate... or at least, that was the best way I could describe it.

But that wasn't quite right. This was hardly the massive, well-furnished mansion of nobility. Judging by size alone, it looked like it belonged to a well-to-do merchant, even though the building hadn't been used for quite some time. There was little in the way of furniture, and the floor was covered in a thin layer of white dust. It wasn't in enough disrepair to look abandoned, but it did look like it'd been untouched for a year, maybe two.

I was just glad we hadn't ended up in a den of undead, all under the control of the Cardinal.

“It looks like some kind of mansion.” Ariane glanced around at our surroundings and put to words what I had been thinking.

“Kyii.”

Ponta dove off from my helmet and easily glided over to a nearby table where it walked around in circles, leaving clear pawprints in its wake. It cocked its head to the side in wonder.

“Judging by the state of neglect, this probably isn't where they escaped to. There may be several transportation stones which teleport you to one of any number of hideouts that the Cardinals may have gone to.”

Ariane nodded in agreement to my assessment and furrowed her brow. “That definitely seems possible. In that case, we're back at square one in our hunt for the Cardinals.”

As she spoke, she shot a glance over toward Chiyome, who was known for her ability to gather information. The young cat girl was already leaning down toward the ground, seemingly about to lick the floor.

“Did you find something?”

Chiyome did not reply to my question, only throwing her hand up to keep me

from interrupting her before she looked up and cast her attentive gaze back and forth. I smiled slightly in spite of myself as I saw the top of her hat, pulled down low over her head, twitch and undulate as her ears moved about frantically beneath it.

In stark contrast to my rather casual demeanor, Chiyome finally stood up after a few months and fixed me with her azure gaze.

“You were right, Arc. This place hasn’t been used for some time... but that doesn’t mean no one’s been here.”

She pointed toward the center of the room. Specifically, at a footprint.

“It looks like they were treading lightly, but you can still make out the footprint. Judging by the print, it looks like the person is lightweight and was either walking on the tips of their toes or wearing high heels.”

She raised her finger as she spoke, tracing a line in the air from the footprint toward the nearby window.

“This person made their way from here to the window, and from there, to the door on the opposite side of the room.”

I opened my eyes wide and gazed at the floor, but I still couldn’t make out anything. The dust at the center of the room was much thinner than toward the edges, making it nearly impossible for a novice like myself to make out any footprints.

Ariane also knelt down and gazed at the route pointed out by Chiyome before, a moment later, gasping in surprise. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“Good job, Chiyome. You’re right. I can see it now that I looked closely. It’s like following monster tracks in the forest.”

As a warrior, Ariane was charged with hunting monsters in the great forest—a task which made her quite good at tracking both monsters and animals. However, following human footprints on hard stone and wooden flooring was apparently much harder than it appeared.

“Unfortunately, I have no idea what we’re looking at.”

I slumped my shoulders and looked up at the ceiling in a sign of surrender.

I could only just make out the faintest hint of what could be footprints at the edge of the room near the window, and that was if someone pointed it out. As only the tip of the foot left any impression in the dust, we were likely looking at the footprints of a woman wearing heels. I had to admire Chiyome's investigative and reasoning abilities. As far as I was concerned, her skills were nothing short of magic. If she ever wanted to give up on being a ninja, she could definitely make a living as a private investigator.

"...So it looks like this building is in a human settlement of some sort."

Ariane leaned in toward the window and glanced outside, pulling the hood of her charcoal-colored cloak even lower over her head to hide her elven features. I followed suit and made my way over to the window for a peek outside.

On the other side of the glass, fixed in place within a beautiful frame, was an unkempt garden, and beyond that, a large brick wall that stood about as tall as the building itself, with a neighboring mansion visible just beyond the wall. Judging by the height of the wall, the other mansion must be around two stories, with an attic built into the roof. The pillars and windows were all intricately decorated.

I could see other, similar mansions further in the distance, suggesting that we were in a relatively well-to-do region and thus were in a rather large city.

"I don't know what country we're in, but we're definitely in a relatively large city."

I turned back toward the room just in time to see Chiyome open the door and peer out into the hallway.

"Well, it looks like they made their way straight toward the front door."

With that, she stepped out of the room and disappeared into the hallway, following the footprints. After watching her leave, I started walking around the room, placing my feet carefully as I looked around. I peered into the cabinets on the walls, which appeared to be empty.

"Kyii!"

Ponta glided into the empty cabinet and began sniffing around. I shut the door on my furry companion, eliciting a series of angry mews in response.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

Chuckling to myself, I opened and closed the door several more times before I felt someone gently smack the back of my head.

“Cut it out, Arc. Why are you playing with Ponta?”

“Kyiiii!”



Glancing back, I noticed Ariane had her brow furrowed and a rather annoyed look on her face.

“Ah, uh, no... it’s just that there’s nothing for me to do.”

Her golden eyes narrowed at my response. “Chiyome’s finding out where the footprints lead, so you and I should see if we can find any leads in some of the other rooms. And Ponta too, of course.”

“Kyii!”

Ariane reached into the cabinet and pulled Ponta close to her chest before heading out the door Chiyome had left through only moments ago. I followed quickly behind.

“Let’s start with the room next door.”

Her expression suddenly went calm and unreadable as she clasped the door handle, probably trying to get a sense for the room beyond. Sometimes she would look like that when we were training together—an expression I’d learned meant that she was focusing on her senses.

She finally pushed the door open and looked inside.

“An...open hall?”

“Kyii.”

Having apparently judged there to be no danger, she carried Ponta with her into the room, though there was something perplexing about her voice. Stepping into the room after her, I also witnessed the bizarre sight ahead.

The room was vast, at least twice the size of the one we’d just left, with open walkways on the second floor running along either side of the room overlooking the first, giving a full view of everything down below. The pillars on the first floor that supported the hallway were all etched with intricate markings.

Unlike the wooden floors in the room we’d left behind, the flooring here was a beautiful tiled mosaic, giving the impression of a large dance hall. That alone was enough to make the room feel luxurious, but there were several things that caught my eye and ruined the image of a beautiful dance hall.

“Cages...or, rather, prison cells?”

Ariane furrowed her brow and cocked her head to the side.

“Hmm, hard to say.”

The room was filled with wooden cages, approximately two-meter cubes that, in spite of their wooden construction, were made of reinforced, interlocking beams and outfitted with metal locks. There looked to be about six in total, the sheer size of them making the vast room feel a lot smaller than it was.

I wondered if the owner of the mansion kept pets as I knocked lightly on the cages. They seemed well built and still new.

“The way this place has been neglected doesn’t line up with the age of these cages. It seems like they’re a recent addition.”

Ariane inspected the cages closely. She seemed to be of the same mind.

“You’re right, it sure looks that way.”

I nodded along in agreement as I reached down to touch the cage’s lock. It wouldn’t open, apparently already in the locked position. There didn’t appear to be any keys nearby.

Suddenly, something at the edge of my vision caught my attention. I turned to get a better look.

One of the wooden bars fitted into the cage had a peculiar mark burnt into it. The mark itself was a fairly simple geometrical pattern and didn’t look like a family crest or something which would be used to mark the owner’s property. It was no design I’d ever seen before, so perhaps it was the mark of the craftsman who made it?

I decided to ask Ariane about it, though she merely shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve never seen it before, either.”

That was about all the information we had, then.

“Hmm, assuming this was one of the Cardinals’ hideouts, I can’t imagine these were used for anything good. What should we do? Break them?”

Ariane pursed her lips for a moment before finally shaking her head.

“It’s best we try not to alert anyone to our presence. It doesn’t look like there’s anything else in here, so let’s check elsewhere.”

I nodded in agreement, and we made our way in the opposite direction from where Chiyome had gone down the hallway, toward the kitchen. However, this room was, much like the first one we appeared in, completely empty, with the exception of some stocked food and some firewood left in the pantry. Nothing stood out as particularly suspicious.

Absent anything of interest, we left the kitchen behind and returned to the entrance where Chiyome was still looking around.

“The person whose steps I’ve been following made their way straight to the entrance. I can’t follow their trail any further than that, since many people were coming in and out of the room, but I’m pretty sure they went outside.”

After Chiyome’s report, Ariane told her about the wooden cages we found. Chiyome furrowed her brow at that, said she was going to take a look herself, and hurried off to the hall.

I watched her back for a moment before turning my gaze up to the ceiling.

“I guess we can leave that to Chiyome while we check out the second floor.”

“You’re right.”

We made our way up to the second floor together, only to find it even more empty than the first, with only a few vacant rooms. Empty-handed, we made our way downstairs and found Chiyome, a look of consternation on her face after having left the cells behind.

“Ariane and I checked out the second floor, but there was nothing of note there. Did you pick up anything new from the hall?”

Chiyome shook her head and frowned.

“No, not really. Some people brought the materials for those cages in and assembled them onsite, but that’s about it. I figure all the people coming in and out were probably related to that.”

That made sense. The cages were two-meter cubes; there was no way they could have gotten them in as they were. The doorway may have been tall

enough, but it definitely wasn't wide enough.

Ariane agreed with Chiyome's assessment and supplemented it with her own impressions. "It also seems like the cages haven't been used yet but are meant for something in the future."

"Hmm, so if we assume this is the Cardinals' hideout and that they recently brought some things here, it should mean they may show up again?"

Judging by what they were saying, and the state of the building, I figured the odds of this were high, but neither Ariane nor Chiyome seemed convinced.

Chiyome was the first to express her doubts. "Hmm, I wonder. If that transportation stone was a sort of magical emergency escape tool, would you really use this place as your hideout?"

Ariane crossed her arms and agreed with Chiyome. "Right. If we assume this was meant to help them escape, then it might be best to think of this building as an exit point. In that case, I doubt someone on the run would stay here forever."

I tilted my head to the side at this. What they were saying made sense—it was pretty common for important figures to flee their protective castles as they fell to an assault, using preprepared escape routes to make it to safety. In fact, I'd seen such an escape route myself since coming here. So if we considered the transportation stone the entrance to such an escape route, hidden by the church, then this building would be the exit. Linger here after teleporting away would do them little good. It seemed plausible that the real hideout was somewhere else.

But this was all nothing more than guesswork.

"I'm curious about all the people coming and going from here, but I doubt speculating will get us anywhere. I guess we should go check out the town?"

I looked at Ariane and Chiyome in turn. They both appeared to be in agreement.

Chiyome clarified our first objective. "First, we need to figure out where we are."

“Considering what I could see from the second-floor window, the city is pretty big. There’s no way we’ll be done searching in a day or two. That means we’ll be using this building as our base of operations, so we need to find some kind of marker inside to teleport back to.”

I pulled my sketchbook of transportation points out of my bag as I spoke. I used it to sketch images of the points necessary for my long-distance teleportation magic, to help me clearly visualize them in my mind. In a world like this, without the convenience of photography, it was easy for my memories of specific locations to get hazy if I didn’t commit them to paper. This would be no problem if I had a great memory, but unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

I was looking around for a unique room or something else to sketch when Chiyome suddenly raised her hand.

“If we’re going to use this mansion as our teleportation point, we should probably choose a room on the second floor and avoid the first, since there are so many people coming through. There’s a chance we could accidentally run into someone when we teleport here.”

She was right. Ariane nodded in agreement with Chiyome’s assessment.

“It’s likely anyone using this place would avoid coming here in the daytime, but just in case. We can’t overlook the fact that it might be the owner who’s been visiting.”

In that case, I’d want to find a place in one of the rooms on the second floor to teleport to. But as we’d already seen, there was nothing particularly memorable up there, so it would probably be best to draw the scene from one of the windows up on the second floor.

“You’re right. All right, I’ll get to work up on the second floor. I should be done in about an hour.”

Ariane nodded in agreement and cast a gaze toward Chiyome.

“Chiyome and I will take another look around the mansion. Ponta can come too.”

“Kyii!”

With our respective tasks chosen, I made my way to the second floor while Ariane and the others made their rounds downstairs.

All right, time to practice my art.

“We’re about ready to go, Arc. How’s it going with you?”

“Kyii!”

Ariane and Ponta popped into the corner room on the second floor where I was busily sketching away. Raising my eyes from the sketchbook, I looked around the room and compared it to what I had on paper. Figuring it was enough to help refresh my memory, I closed the sketchbook, slid it into my bag, and turned my attention to Ariane, asking how their search had gone.

“Just finished. Did you find anything new?”

Ariane shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Chiyome found an attic, but nothing really noteworthy.”

Nothing, huh? I felt a small wave of regret wash over me as I considered how the attic would probably have made a better teleportation point. Alas, I wasn’t about to make them wait another hour.

“Shall we get going, then?”

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, I took a few steps before Ponta dashed away from Ariane and deftly climbed my body to its rightful perch atop my head.

Chiyome was already at the entrance waiting for us when Ariane and I arrived. With her hat pulled down low over her head and ninja attire hidden underneath her cloak, she looked like a normal little girl off on a trip. After acknowledging our presence, she deftly opened the door with one hand.

“Judging by the mansion and surrounding area, a lot of rich people live here. Unfortunately, the two of you look distinctly like mercenaries and stick out like sore thumbs, so we should head downtown to start.”

I nodded in agreement, though I was left with one niggling question. “Do you know the layout of this city, Chiyome?”

I’d gotten a sense of the area thanks to the view from the second-floor window, but since all the surrounding buildings were around the same height, it was impossible to get a good look at where downtown might even be. Perhaps she’d realized while looking around that she’d been here before?

“No, I slipped out a window in the attic and onto the roof, and climbed one of the spires to get a better look at our surroundings. As far as I can recall, I’ve never been here before.”

Well, that was certainly a ninja-like solution. I was impressed by her ability to get the lay of the land. It brought to mind a foreign game I’d played in the past that used a similar method for filling out your map. Of course, if I—a man outfitted in hulking armor—were to try the same and climb a building’s spire, I’d undoubtedly draw a lot of attention. No, sneaking around without being detected was Chiyome’s domain.

“This way.”

Chiyome led the way, sneaking out the front door and into the unkempt yard. Considering the size of the mansion, the yard itself was rather small, marked mainly by a waist-high brick flowerbed running along the wall surrounding the estate, though it was now filled with nothing but wild weeds.

There were two massive wooden doors marking the front entrance to the estate, though Chiyome steered clear of them and headed instead toward what looked like a staff entrance. Unlike the main entrance, the staff entrance was only about as high as Chiyome was tall—meaning Ariane and I would need to crouch down if we ever hoped to get through.

“We can’t go through there?”

I gestured toward the large doors of the main entrance, but Chiyome merely shook her head.

“Those are held closed with a locked chain wrapped around the handles from the outside. This staff entrance has only a simple lock installed on the outside. Easy to open from this end.”

Apparently, she'd also scouted out the yard while I was upstairs sketching. Since the estate was surrounded by tall, thick walls, Chiyome and Ariane needn't worry about being seen by passersby while taking a look around the yard. However, I wondered if she'd accounted for the fact that someone on the upper floors of a neighboring building could have looked out and seen them.

Chiyome slid the door open as she spoke.

"We're lucky that these residences don't belong to nobility, since they often have guards stationed at the entrances. That'd make moving around during the daytime much more difficult."

She then deftly slipped outside through the entrance. Ariane followed after her and I dropped down to my hands and knees to crawl through. I had to do a bit of wriggling back and forth just to get my broad, armored shoulders through.

Brushing the dirt off of my cloak, I looked around at the city before us.

"Putting aside how small the entrance is, this will definitely be more convenient for coming and going in and out of the property."

We emerged onto a wide, semi-busy residential street with large, elegant houses flanking us on both sides. Just as Chiyome had said, I got some glances from the well-dressed carriage drivers riding their finely groomed horses through the streets. They didn't seem terribly interested in our presence, but considering where we were, it was undeniable that a band of mercenaries and travelers would stand out amidst the servants making their rounds across various estates and the upper crust being carted around in horse-drawn carriages.

Until we were able to find a new place to teleport into, this mansion would have to serve as our entrance point to the city. Just to be on the safe side, though, it couldn't hurt to look for another teleportation point while we checked out the city and tried to figure out where we were.

While I was busy pondering these details, Chiyome gently slid a long, thin lock pick into the door's keyhole and locked it again. She sure was good at what she did. She must be re-locking the door to avoid raising the suspicions of anyone who came in after us. If I'd come out here alone, I would have undoubtedly left the lock wide open.

“Where do we go next?”

Ariane rose from a crouch and stretched to her full height, looking up and down the road before glancing back down at Chiyome. The younger girl responded with a nod.

“We’ll go west from here. Follow me.”

With that, she took the lead.

Strange as it might seem for mercenaries to be in such a wealthy part of town, I spotted other mercenary-looking types going in and out of mansions. Perhaps we didn’t stick out quite as much as I’d thought. Mercenaries worked for money, after all. It was inevitably the rich who hired them for their services, meaning there might actually be quite a few mercenaries coming to visit this part of town.

We walked through this unknown city for some time before our surroundings began to change. The number of pedestrians increased and, with them, so did the bustle around us. What was once mostly large, stone houses with wide gardens gave way to cramped houses practically built one on top of another. The building material of choice for first floors was stone while second floors were mostly made of wood, giving a very ‘commoner’ feel to this part of the city.

The types of people we encountered also changed, now including local residents, merchants leading horse-drawn carts, and even groups of mercenaries talking among themselves off in the corner. City guards fixed the mercenaries with angry glares, while street performers dressed in vibrant costumes performed their feats.

The sheer variety of people here was quite different from what you’d see in the elven villages. While I liked the clean and peaceful life the elves lived, there was also something nostalgic about this kind of city life, considering I’d grown up in a bustling city in modern society.

That said, this was a human city, which meant Ariane had to be careful to keep her cloak pulled tight to conceal her identity. What was more, she was

quite a beauty in her own right, so just one look at her face could turn any of the uncouth men around us into the big bad wolf on the hunt. But even without getting a look at her face, the gentle undulations of her chest protruding through the cloak were enough to incite lewd looks and catcalls from the men. Just walking through the crowd and fixing them all with a steely glare was growing tiring.

Alas, we had other tasks to attend to.

I stopped and rolled my shoulders back and forth to loosen them up.

“This is a good time to start our investigation, now that we’re in a different part of town.”

Chiyome stopped, glanced around, and nodded.

“You’re probably right. I noticed a lot of signs of the empire while we were walking, though I can’t say if this city belongs to the eastern or western empire.”

She glanced at a nearby building and looked it over before nodding in confirmation. Ariane’s eyes went wide under her cloak, clearly surprised at Chiyome’s assertion.

“Wait, you can tell what country we’re in just by how the buildings look??”

The cause of her surprise was twofold. First was the fact that the elves inhabiting the Great Canada Forest mostly lived in buildings constructed with magic, consisting of an amalgamation of both artificial construction and nature. In that sense, all buildings differed in completely natural ways. However, their basic shapes were nearly identical and uniform from village to village, making it a refreshingly eye-opening experience to her that each country would have its own construction methods and building designs.

I doubted this knowledge gap caused the elves much issue. Though they may have once lived all across the continent, they’d ultimately congregated in the Great Canada Forest after years of persecution at human hands, causing their diverse cultures to merge into one unified elven culture.

The second reason for Ariane’s surprise was that all these human cities looked nearly identical to her, leading her to overlook the small design differences. The

fact that Chiyome could put together a theory based on those differences alone was a testament to the impressive breadth of her knowledge—something that even most humans probably didn't know.

I could distinguish stone from wood, but the methods used in their construction and the nature of the designs were far beyond my expertise. Architectural styles varied with geography, cultural customs, and even the building's history. It wasn't just the type of stone that differed, but also how they were shaped and stacked.

In a sense, you could get a glimpse of the city's history by looking at how its architecture transitioned from one end to the other. Its rise and fall from rags to riches were mapped on the changes within it.

Chiyome looked a bit perplexed at Ariane's surprise. She absentmindedly scratched her head. "Well, I don't really know all the cities throughout the dual empires, so this is just an educated guess. I'm seeing a lot of designs I've never come across before."

She pointed out some buildings as she spoke. Even so, to people as unobservant as Ariane and I, the information her knowledge and keen eye provided us was invaluable.

"No need to be so humble, Chiyome. Ariane and I don't know much about this kind of stuff, so anything you can tell us is immensely helpful."

I cast a glance toward Ariane, who raised an eyebrow in response.

"Hey, don't put us in the same category. I just don't know a lot about humans, okay? You don't know much about the world in *general*. Though I do agree that Chiyome's a great help."

That was harsh, but I couldn't really disagree, since I wasn't actually from this world and hadn't even been here all that long. If anything, it was entirely understandable that I didn't know much about the world.

"Kyii! Kyiii!!"

Apparently, Ponta wanted to join in the conversation as well. I reached up to stroke its tail before trying to return to the topic at hand.

“First off, I guess we need the city’s name. Maybe a sign or something like that?” I glanced around, talking mostly to myself.

In a video game, there’d usually be a person standing around at the entrance to the town who’d welcome you and tell you where you were. But the real world wasn’t that convenient. We could just stop someone and ask where we were, but that kind of behavior would easily raise suspicion, not unlike a time traveler demanding to know the date from a passerby in a sci-fi flick.

Other than that, I supposed we could pretend we’d suddenly been struck by amnesia or had a really bad memory. But since we were here trying to hunt down the Cardinals, it would do us no good to draw attention to ourselves.

I puzzled over the problem for a moment, then suddenly felt Ponta move and turned to look in the direction it was pointing in.

“Kyii.”

It was pointing toward a stall parked in the middle of a large clearing. It might have been a food stall—I caught a whiff of a delicious scent—but there was something about Ponta’s response that didn’t seem like it was interested in the food they were selling.

The stall owner was selling skewers of grilled meat, but what drew my eye was the group of kids dressed in filthy rags standing around nearby. The owner was yelling at the kids, trying to shoo them off.

“I don’t need dirty little mooches like you standing around outside my stall! You’re going to drive away the customers. Get outta here!”

However, the kids didn’t move, which only managed to rile the owner up even more. Looking at the expression on his face and the way he crossed his arms, I stepped right into the middle of the encounter.

“You just can’t keep yourself out of trouble, can you Arc?”

I ignored Ariane’s complaint and tried to keep my voice as cheerful as possible as I stepped in between the parties.

“Hey, hey, no need to get so worked up, sir.”

“Huh, wha?!”

The owner was about to turn his anger on me before he got a good look at who he was talking to. A look of shock overtook his face and he tensed up immediately.

“H-hello there, fine sir. I, uh, I just figured that they would be a bother to my other customers.”

He was instantly far more polite. Perhaps my gleaming armor gave him the impression that I was some kind of well-to-do knight? However, he kept glancing between me and Ponta, sitting atop my head. The confused look on his face conveyed his doubt that a knight would walk around with a little critter riding on him.

I ignored his reaction and continued, “I don’t think they’re such a bother. After all, your goods are so enticing that the kids are drawn in. I only came here because I was intrigued to see what would bring all these children here. I wouldn’t dare get rid of the kids. If anything, they’re an advertisement.”

The owner glared at this before quickly hiding his expression. I pulled out a silver coin and flipped it around between my fingers.

“What can I buy with this?”

He squinted at the silver coin I placed in his hand before a massive smile broke out on his face. With a bow of his head, he made his way back to the roasting meat. The children, as well as other passersby making their way through the clearing, watched him with great interest.

The owner might be rude and ill-tempered, but he did seem to be a good cook. He turned the skewers in turn to keep them from burning. Each time a droplet of sauce-drenched fat fell to the fire, a delicious scent exploded into the air.

The owner picked five skewers of meat and handed them over.

“Here you are, my famous grilled boar with sauce.”

I nodded as I accepted them, feeling the children’s eyes following the meat the whole time. I cleared my throat to try to make myself sound as chipper as possible before immediately turning around and raising the sticks of boar meat high up into the air.

“You know, I find myself here in the middle of a great journey, and yet I just so happened to have completely forgotten the name of this city in which I find myself. If only there were someone so kind as to tell me the name of this city...I would gladly reward them.”

I gestured exaggeratedly as I slowly wagged the skewers in my hand back and forth. One child’s hand quickly shot up into the air, and he yelled out.

“Rontestatt, you’re in Rontestatt!”

Realizing what I was getting at, the other children quickly chimed in as well, throwing up their hands and yelling out the same name. It seemed pretty certain that we were in the city of Rontestatt, at least.

“Oh, is that so! My memory’s coming back to me, that’s right...Rontestatt! Thanks, kids. It’s not much, but here’s your reward.”

I brought my hands together in front of my face in a sign of appreciation before exaggeratedly pretending to remember and handing over a skewer to the child who first responded. His eyes went wide at the sight. He gingerly took the skewer from my hand as all the other children shot jealous looks in his direction.

“Ya know, I traveled all the way here... and yet I seem to have forgotten the name of the country I’m in. That’s rough. Just where is this place, anyway?”

The children immediately broke their gaze away from the meat and turned back toward me, hands launching into the air.

“Revlon! You’re in the Revlon Empire!”

“No, stupid, that’s the old name! This is the Great Revlon Empire!”

One after another, the children also gave the same response, making it all but certain this was the Great Revlon Empire. I’d traveled to the eastern empire—the Holy Revlon Empire—in the past, so that would mean that this city resided in their imperial neighbor to the west.

“Huh, it looks like I got my memory back. Here’s a token of my appreciation.”

Just as I had with the first child, I handed each of the children a skewer, which they immediately began to gobble up. There were now two children left and

two skewers in my hand. The children looked at me expectantly, awaiting a question. However, no question came to mind. Met with silence, their faces grew sad.

Just then, Ariane offered me a lifeline.

“Hmm, now, could anyone tell me just how far we are from the imperial capital?”

The children initially looked confused at the sudden appearance of the tall woman dressed in a charcoal-gray cloak. They glanced up at her before turning their gaze back to me. I gave a nod, indicating that the question was acceptable to me, though I feared that might be too difficult for them. Based on their attire, it was hard to believe these children went to school or received any form of education. It seemed improbable that they knew much about the world outside the city limits, or even left the city at all.

As expected, the children briefly talked amongst themselves before welling up in tears of frustration at not knowing the answer. Ariane glanced nervously at me, seeking a way out.

Much to my surprise, it was actually the stall owner who came to save the day.

“It’s a four-day journey by carriage off to the east to get to the capital from here. Do you have business in the capital, fine sir?”

The stone-faced stall owner didn’t even look in my direction as he spoke, his attention focused on turning the meat. I had to overcome my desire to laugh at the sight before holding out the remaining two skewers in his direction.

“Ah, thank you, sir. I don’t suppose you’ll take this token of my appreciation?”

He narrowed his brow and offered up a wry smile. “You must be kidding. You can give it to those little runts over there.”

I chuckled at the expected response and handed the skewers to the children. “It looks like the nice stall owner is going to let you have these. Be sure to thank him.”

The children immediately turned toward the man, bowed their heads low,

and thanked him. Rather than responding, he merely waved them off, much as he had done earlier before turning to look off into the distance.

“You’re a strange one. Some kind of traveling mercenary, I guess? With fancy armor like that, I’d figure you to be a knight from some noble family or something.”

He fixed his gaze on me.

I chuckled slightly before prompting him to continue. “And what makes you think I’m a traveling mercenary?”

“Well, I mean, you paid me in Rhoden coinage. I was born in a town pretty close to the Rhoden Kingdom, so I’ve seen their coins from time to time, but it’s been quite a while since I saw any so close to the Aspania border. You from Rhoden?”

He spoke in a monotone drawl, seemingly not particularly interested. Judging by how he spoke, Rontestatt must be a fair distance from the Rhoden Kingdom. Since I didn’t detect any suspicion in his tone, I figured there was no need to keep that fact a secret. After glancing at Ariane and Chiyome, and getting affirmative nods from both, I chuckled and continued on.

“Actually, we came here on a job.”

Chiyome spoke up next, fixing the owner with a harsh glare. “Don’t you think you’re overcharging a bit for that meat?”

The man recoiled slightly before shaking his head.

“No, no... I mean, you know how it is?! With all the trouble on the Aspania border, the restrictions on travel have gotten pretty harsh. Everything in the city’s getting more expensive.”

He groaned in annoyance, as if to underscore that it wasn’t his fault. It seemed evident that the city of Rontestatt was in a pretty dire situation with the neighboring country of Aspania. Judging by all the other armored mercenaries dressed similarly to us, he probably assumed we were in the same boat as the others who’d come here seeking work related to the border issues. Fighters for hire suddenly became invaluable the moment trouble broke out. Personally speaking, though, I had no interest in getting involved in petty

quibbles between kingdoms.

The stall owner let out a heavy sigh and slumped his shoulders. “Only certain merchants and mercenaries are currently allowed to freely leave the city. I really hope this whole conflict with Aspania blows over soon.”

After parting ways with the man, Ariane, Chiyome, and I stopped to chat at a corner of the clearing.

“It sounds like this city of Rontestatt is near the border of the western empire. Have you ever heard of the name before, Chiyome?”

She shook her head apologetically.

“No, unfortunately not. Our ancestors were driven out of here a long time ago. What’s more, if we’re about four days away by horse from the central region, then we must be far deeper than any member of the Jinshin clan has come before.”

Apparently the Jinshin clan’s information network was focused mostly around the central region of the empire.

“However, I recall that Aspania, the neighboring country that the stall owner mentioned earlier, is on the western edge of the northern continent. That must mean that Rontestatt is near that border.”

As she spoke, I called to mind an image of a map of the northern continent, though the details were hazy. I could remember the basic shapes, but the details were beyond me.

Realizing I was at a loss, Chiyome crouched down and sketched a rough map into the dirt with her finger and then circled a region.

“Aspania is around here or so.”

She was pointing at a narrow stretch of land in the northwest sandwiched between the Holy Hilk Kingdom and the Great Revlon Empire.

“Huh, so that means that we must be located somewhere along that border. In that case, we must’ve traveled quite a ways away from the Rhoden Kingdom and Great Canada Forest.”

“Kyii.”

I placed my finger on the Rhoden Kingdom, in the south east of Chiyome's map, and stretched out my hand toward Aspania Kingdom to gauge the distance.

Ponta followed the movement of my finger for a moment before jumping down to the ground.

Ariane let out a sigh as she looked over the map.

"Well, we know where we are. But the more important thing is whether or not the cardinals are here."

"I could walk all over the city trying to find if there are any undead here, but that'd take a while."

Chiyome was right. It was clear from how far we'd walked thus far that the city was immense. She was certainly more than capable enough of using her keen sense of smell to uncover any hiding undead cardinals, but that'd mean that we would be stuck here in the city for some time. If the cardinals had already left the city, then their trail could go cold in the meantime.

But that also didn't mean that we could just leave the city without performing an investigation.

I glanced at Ponta, who was sniffing around at the map sketched into the dirt.

"Hey, Ponta...you're even better at smelling out the undead than Chiyome, right? Did you smell any undead here so far?"

Ponta cocked its head to the side at this and raised its nose up into the air to sniff around, turning in a slow circle while Ariane and Chiyome watched on with anticipation.

After it finished sniffing, however, Ponta's large, fluffy tail slumped to the ground and it tilted its head to the side again, giving a weak mew.

"Kyiiiin."

Seemed like there were no undead nearby, at least. Not like I expected to find them that easily.

Ariane slumped her shoulders, looking slightly dejected.

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t be that easy. We should probably start with any churches in the city then.”

I tilted my head to the side and expressed my doubts.

“I’m not so sure. After we’d killed the Pontiff, the leader of the church, doesn’t it seem rather short-sighted to once again try to conceal yourself at the church while on the run?”

With that said, though, it didn’t necessarily mean that we could exclude the churches from our search outright.

Chiyome seemed to have read my mind.

“Even if unlikely, we still need to search. So why don’t we ask how many churches there are in the city and pay them a visit?”

Ariane and I both agreed with Chiyome’s plan.

“Agreed.”

“That sounds like a fair plan.”

I picked Ponta up and made my way toward the nearest person to ask about any nearby churches.

Ultimately, all of the Hilk churches in the city were a bust.

We started at the biggest of the five churches in town first, but it was a rather simple affair compared to all the highly decorated ones we’d encountered in the past. Perhaps the lack of decorative elements were due to the simple construction.

Put simply, none of the churches in the city were big or impressive enough to be sights worth visiting, and all seemed to be meant for day-to-day affairs of the people living here. Some of them even looked like large sheds that had been repurposed into a church.

According to the locals we spoke to, money was spent more on improving on and expanding city defenses and other works rather than beautifying the churches as the city was located along a national border. Here, too, was the

look and history of the city affected by its geography.

Considering this, it seemed unlikely that the cardinals would be hiding out in any of these churches, but we still had Chiyome and Ponta take a look around all the same. This bore no results either and the day was coming to a close as the sun began to set.

I mumbled to myself, speaking to no one in particular.

“I expected the kinds of churches we’d seen back in the eastern empire, but all the ones here were pretty plain. Ponta or Chiyome would’ve definitely smelled the cardinals if they were hiding out in any of these small locations, but we’ve got nothing.”

Ariane stretched her arms out high above her head.

“This is awful. That means that the cardinals could have headed off to a completely different city, then, maybe even the capital. Considering it’s the center of the empire, there must be even more humans living there.”

I had figured the same. It was certainly probable. After all, a larger city with an even larger population would make it all the easier to remain hidden. Conversely, there were also benefits to hiding out in a politically unstable city such as this one. Both options were equally possible.

Finally, it was Chiyome who brought our present issue to the table.

“If I recall correctly, Vittelvarlay is the capital of the Great Revlon Empire. Assuming the cardinals skipped town, then I think that’s the most likely place for them to go. However, according to the stall owner we spoke to, you would need to prove that you’re either a merchant or mercenary in order to leave town.”

I recalled what the stall owner had mentioned earlier.

I still had the mercenary license I got back in the Rhoden Kingdom, but it seemed incredibly unlikely that a mercenary license issued in another country could also be used here. What’s more, neither Ariane nor Chiyome had one. That meant that we would need to once again apply to be mercenaries here in the empire if we planned on leaving the city limits.

...or maybe not. There was a faster way.

“I could just use my teleportation magic to take us out of town in an instant.”

I’d used this technique to both leave and sneak into cities in the past.

Chiyome shook her head and pointed out the problem with that.

“If they’re preparing to deal with a threat from a neighboring country, then there are almost certainly a number of guards patrolling the outer limits and roads into and out of town. It would also make sense for there to be checkpoints along the road to the capital to check for any issues. If anyone were to realize that you were traveling using teleportation magic, that would make it all the more difficult for us to operate out here.”

She was right. We needed to operate stealthily if we wanted to ensure that the cardinals didn’t pick up on our activities.

Ariane also nodded, seemingly in agreement.

I took a look at the two talented fighters in front of me.

“In that case, it would probably be best for us to acquire any identification we need to travel throughout the empire in the future here in this city. If it’s a choice between us being merchants or mercenaries, then I think it would probably be a lot easier for us to get a mercenary license.”

Ariane and Chiyome were definitely more than skilled enough to earn the title of mercenary, so not only could we look the part, but we could also take on any jobs that came along.

Considering the difficulty involved in hunting down the cardinals, it would probably be fair to assume that we would be operating out here in the empire for a while yet. In that case, it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for all of us to have a mercenary license to help along our search.

Ariane gazed out from beneath her hood, a worried expression on her face.

“I don’t see any problem with getting a mercenary license if that’s what we need to become mercenaries to legally leave the city, but will Chiyome and I be able to get one as non-humans?”

She was right to be worried. If they had any kind of background check when

registering as a mercenary, then their true identities would come out. Then again, the skeleton lurking within my armor was not much different.

“Since we currently don’t have any other leads on the cardinals, it certainly can’t hurt to expand our search. We’d best ask about any concerns we have regarding mercenary registration once we’re there.”

“You’re right. Well, then, let’s figure out where one signs up.”

Chiyome stood up and started to look around. She spotted a group of people who looked to me like mercenaries, standing around off in a corner of the town square, and made her way over to them to chat. After exchanging a few words, the mercenaries turned their gaze toward me. Seemingly convinced by what they saw, they nodded and talked to Chiyome some more before gesturing toward a nearby road. It looked like she’d managed to find out where we needed to go.

Perhaps they were a little suspicious of the young girl asking how to register to be a mercenary, but upon seeing me, fully clad in armor, they figured out what she was asking. She truly was brilliant.

A short time later Chiyome returned and reported back that she’d found out the location of the mercenary guild.

“So apparently you need to first register with a place called the mercenary guild and get a guild license if you plan on operating as a mercenary here in the empire. Fortunately for us, the guild office is nearby. What do you want to do?”

I glanced up at the darkening sky. We had just about enough time to register with the mercenary guild, or to at least get an explanation from them. However, most businesses tended to close early here, so it’d probably be best to get a move on.

“Your quick thinking saved us once again, so I think it wouldn’t hurt to at least make our way to the mercenary guild and see if we can register. But we should hurry.”

Ponta wagged its tail back and forth and mewed in agreement.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

The mercenary guild was located a short distance away, where one of the streets running toward the town square branched off. It consisted of three floors, the first made of stone and second and third from wood, and sported a large, unadorned entrance.

A man, ostensibly an employee of the guild, wielding a large hammer stood next to the entrance, fixing anyone who walked past with a steely glare. I could feel his gaze fall upon us as Ponta and I, followed by Ariane and Chiyome, entered the building.

The interior of the building was just as simple and unadorned as the exterior, giving the building a rough-around-the-edges feel. Several men were talking boisterously inside when we first walked in, but their gaze fell upon us the moment my two female companions came into view. I took a look around the room, ignoring the gawking men.

Next to the entrance was a bulletin board, on which jobs issued with the guild were pinned. Some of the requests were written up on only what could charitably be called paper. Looked like they had quite a bit of work to go around. Across from the entrance was a counter surrounded by iron bars, not unlike the one I'd seen back in the mercenary guild in the Rhoden Kingdom. Inside the cage, I spied several staff members—all of them male—bustling about as they performed their work.

The whole guild had the same filthy, sordid feeling as the one back in Rhoden. To be fair, it made sense to avoid the kind of trouble one could invite by putting female staff behind the counter, considering the rough-and-tumble sorts who went into the mercenary trade.

I stepped up to the counter and spoke to the nearest staff member. "Excuse me, I'd like to register as a mercenary. Could you tell me what I need for registration?"

The man, an older fellow with salt-and-pepper hair, looked up at me and bellowed out in laughter.

"You say you want to be a mercenary, sir knight?"

The words seemed oddly familiar.

I hunched down slightly and laughed myself.

“I’m no one important, and certainly not a knight. We are wandering mercenaries, relying on nothing but our own abilities as we move about freely wherever our mood takes us. I heard from someone in town that we can’t leave without a mercenary license.”

A look of suspicion washed across the man’s face.

“Sure, that’s true. You can’t enter or leave the city due to concerns about the neighboring kingdom unless you’re a merchant or a licensed mercenary. But how did you get into the city in the first place?”

The question was obvious.

With the town on lockdown, there wouldn’t be too many locals wanting to become mercenaries in order to leave the city. While the city of Rontestatt might be quite large, that was only by this world’s standards. I had yet to see a city here with a population even nearing a million, as was common in the modern world I’d come from. Back in my world, a city this size would be the equivalent of a rural settlement in the countryside.

With such a small population, it would be too risky for us to pretend we were locals, especially given how we stood out. Thus, our only option was to state that we came here from elsewhere, though this in turn begged the question of how we got here despite the current lockdown.

The most important thing was to avoid any implication that we’d snuck in and had some sort of connection with the neighboring kingdom.

Fortunately, I’d anticipated this question and already had an answer ready.

“We came here as the bodyguards of a traveling Rhoden merchant who plans to stay in town for a while. We figured we’d move on ahead to the next stop but were told that it would be impossible without a guild license.”

I pulled the guild license I acquired back in the Rhoden Kingdom out of my pocket as I spoke. The man took it into his hand and gazed down at it with great interest.

“Hmm, is that so? Well, then, allow me to explain the registration procedures.

Each registrant will need to pay one gold coin, at which point we will issue you a Third Rank Bronze guild license.”

To supplement his explanation, he pulled three small, square bronze plates from a drawer and placed them on the counter. Each of the plates had different markings etched into them: one with three spears, another with two crossed axes, and a third with a single sword.

Ariane peered down at the items. “What does Third Rank Bronze mean?”

“Imperial guild licenses are assigned different levels. From lowest to highest, there are bronze, silver, and gold. Each of the levels has three ranks, with third being the lowest. These are decided based on the successes and contributions of each individual and group.”

Apparently, the system was slightly different from the one used in the Rhoden Kingdom. The designs on each of the metal plates indicated ranks one through three.

“However, there’s one thing I need you to keep in mind. Just because you’ve registered with the mercenary guild doesn’t mean you instantly have permission to come and go from the city as you please.”

This took Chiyome by surprise. “Are there some other restrictions on that as well?”

The man shot Chiyome—a small girl who looked completely out of place here—a suspicious glance before nodding and answering her question.

“Only those of Third Rank Silver and above are granted the right to come and go as they please. Permission to leave isn’t normally granted, except in special cases such as when you’ve taken a job, so you’ll need to contribute to the guild first. However, it’s usually faster to join a member of a larger mercenary group if you want to get yourself up to Silver.”

Ariane, Chiyome, and I all exchanged glances. It didn’t look like we’d be able to come and go as we pleased for quite some time, even if we registered. Now that I thought about it, though, if simply registering gave you the ability to come and go as you pleased, anyone with the funds could do it, which would defeat the whole purpose of locking down the town.

“So we’ll need to do jobs in town for a while after registering in order to increase our rank?”

“That’s correct. However, as I mentioned earlier, you’ll need to achieve decent results in order to increase your level, which is no easy task unless you join a larger mercenary group. For example, there are no Gold-level mercenary groups with fewer than thirty members. In that sense, the number of members is quite important.”

I tried to organize my thoughts while we listened to the man speak.

According to him, we needed to rack up some noteworthy achievements to reach Silver Rank. But to do *that*, we’d need to take on some fairly significant tasks, such as protecting a VIP or slaying beasts—jobs which were usually only entrusted to mercenary groups with a fairly large number of members. Small groups and individuals were generally only given menial tasks.

Since mercenaries were essentially fighters hired to supplement military forces in the event of war, it was only reasonable that you would need a certain number of people in order to achieve military-grade results. If you pitted a group of ten talented warriors against a hundred semi-decent mercenaries, the latter group would likely come out on top more often than not.

In this sense, the guild was markedly similar to the one in Rhoden Kingdom. It made sense that clients preferred to give protection or monster-culling jobs to larger groups than smaller ones, in the interests of ensuring success.

Our unique circumstances left us unable to join any larger groups. But if our small mercenary party failed to land any major jobs, leaving us unable to increase our guild rank, we’d be stuck in this town forever. Or worse yet, we and the other Bronze-Rank mercenaries would be called upon as an emergency measure to protect the town in the event that hostilities broke out with the neighboring kingdom. Though if that happened, we could at least take advantage of the chaos to escape the city using my teleportation magic.

There was no need for us to attain the highest level, Gold, when Third Rank Silver was the minimum needed to get us permission to leave the city.

I turned toward my two compatriots. Ariane seemed content to go with my plan, while Chiyome leaned in close to whisper something to me.

“I think we should take some menial tasks in the beginning to help us get a sense of the town. It might help us in our search later. It depends on the terms when we sign up, of course, but it couldn’t hurt.”

It was a good plan. I turned back to the man to give our decision.

“Well, then, I’d like to register the three of us with the guild. Can you please let me know if there are any other ancillary terms?”

His eyes went wide in surprise at this. His gaze fell on Chiyome as he spoke.

“The...three of you?”

I knew what was going through his mind, as well as those of the other mercenaries chuckling nearby, but I ignored it.

“She may look small, but she’s quite gifted. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“So, um, will you three be registering separately? Or as a group?”

I tilted my head to the side as I thought his question over. We had no plans to join any other groups, so it might prove beneficial to create our own, even if we only had a few members.

“Hmm, I think we’ll create a three-member group, then. Are there any conditions for creating a mercenary group?”

“Not particularly. You can always add more members later, anyway. However, you’ll probably want at least ten people if you want to get some decent jobs.”

I glanced at the other mercenaries in the guild.

The majority of them were giving us amused looks, as if we were some kind of spectacle, though I knew the two women standing at my side could take them all on with room to spare. They were quite literally one-woman armies in their own right, and we’d pass with flying colors if we were allowed to show that.

But we probably didn’t want to draw too much attention to ourselves. It probably wouldn’t hurt if people saw us as amateurs, anyway.

“That’s fine. Please continue with the registration.”

The man confirmed my request, pulled three guild license registration papers

out from the drawer in front of him, and began to fill them out.

“We’ll also need two gold coins as an administrative fee to register your newly created group. Oh, and please decide on your group’s name.”

Pulling the coins from my bag, I let out a brief sigh when I heard him mention the name. Apparently, the name of our group would be etched into a plaque that, when submitted with our guild licenses, would serve both as proof of identity and a travel pass.

“Hm, our name. I hadn’t actually thought about that.”

I crossed my arms and groaned under my breath. Fortunately, the man behind the counter offered me a lifeline.

“Mercenary group names are important for advertising yourselves, both to your members and to others. Names that are memorable, sound powerful, and really get your blood pumping are most common. If you really aren’t sure right now, you could always register it at a later date.”

Since this was just a temporary job, I wasn’t keen on giving ourselves a really flashy name that would stand out, like he suggested. On the other hand, it would be boring—and maybe even make it hard to get work—if we went with something run-of-the-mill. I glanced over at Ariane and Chiyome, but they only furrowed their brows, lips pursed in thought.

It was then that Ponta decided to break its long silence and jump in.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

A series of chuckles rose from the mercenaries watching us. Ignoring their jeers, I looked up at Ponta.

“All right then, how about Ponta Patrol?”

Ariane and Chiyome exchanged glances for a moment before turning back to me and nodding. Apparently, they were okay with the name.

“I’m fine with it. No need to worry about what we call ourselves.”

“It’s easy to remember, too.”

“Kyiii!”

The only one among us who had a problem with the name was the man behind the counter.

“You can’t be serious! The name of your mercenary group is your reputation! All the other groups are named things like the ‘Silver Lions,’ or the ‘Thunder Hammers.’”

His expression seemed to urge us to reconsider. The names he mentioned were different from our suggestion and might even stand out a bit because of it. I took another look at Ponta to double-check.

“Kyiiii?”

Ponta merely cocked its head to the side and wagged its tail, seemingly disinterested. While I might not be able to register Ponta as a mercenary too, it was definitely one of us, and there was no way I could discard its name. Which could only mean one thing.

“All right then. How about the ‘Turbulent Ponta Patrol’?”

I was pretty chuffed with that name. Not only was it good, but we could also get this done and head home right on time. However, Ariane seemed to have her doubts.

“I don’t think it sounds quite right. What about ‘Verdant Meadow Ponta Patrol’?”

It sounded a bit serene to me—not quite suited to the kind of work mercenaries did. Chiyome turned back from the window with her own recommendation.

“What about the ‘Twilight Cottontail Foxes’?”

That just sounded like the name of an assassin group to me.

After a short debate on what would be the most appropriate name, we decided it would only be fair to let Ponta decide.

“All right, then. From now on, we will be known as the Turbulent Ponta Patrol. Any objections?”

I looked at my compatriots. Ariane merely shrugged her shoulders and Chiyome nodded her assent.

And with that, our first day of the investigation came to a close.

Chapter 2:

New Mercenaries on the Block

“**H**UH, so the transportation stone took you to the western empire?”

Ariane had just finished explaining what we’d done yesterday after teleporting to Glenys over breakfast.

“Kyiiii!”

Ponta was busily eating its breakfast salad at her feet while I cut a notch into Glenys’ freshly baked bread, lining it with thin slices of ham, lettuce, and mayonnaise to make a sandwich before taking a big bite out of it. The ham was nice and salty. No complaints here.

It was a bit of a bizarre sensation to be able to taste food, despite being a skeleton with no tongue.

After registering at the mercenary guild in the city of Rontestatt on the border of the Great Revlon Empire, we left the guild and found a suitably shadowed place

to use my long-distance teleportation magic to bring us back to Lalatoya.

Upon our return, I gave a brief report to Dillan, the village elder, took a bath to wash away the day’s grime, and had some dinner before going to bed. I fell asleep almost as soon as I hit the bed, probably thanks to having spent all day walking around town.

“So are you going back to the empire today? Do you think you’ll find the cardinals?” Glenys asked Ariane as she ladled bean soup into bowls.

Ariane took the bowl and shook her head.

“We’ll be going to the city again, but today we’re going to take on a job we received from the mercenary guild. The hunt for the cardinals is on hold for now.”

“A job from the guild?” Glenys sounded surprised.

As a matter of fact, it had all been decided right after we'd finished registering our name with the mercenary guild.

"Are you sure you're okay with that name?" the guild staff member had asked, seeking to confirm that my mind was set on the name we'd chosen.

After each offering up our own suggestions, we ultimately settled on Turbulent Ponta Patrol. For an impromptu name, I actually quite liked it. In fact, any of the names *he'd* suggested would have just made me uncomfortable.

"It's fine by me."

I looked over at Ariane and Chiyome, neither of whom had any objections. Ariane just shrugged her shoulders. "The whole point of having a group name is to tell them apart from one another, right? It certainly does that."

Chiyome also nodded in agreement. It seemed neither of them had particularly strong feelings about what we called ourselves, anyway.

"Any name that makes it easy to tell us apart is fine by me."

The man muttered his assent, apparently having given up on trying to change my mind. He went back to filling in the paperwork before pausing again a moment later and turning to look up at me.

"And who is in charge of the group?"

Judging by the way he was focused on me, it seemed he was seeking confirmation rather than actually asking. However, I turned toward Ariane. I figured she would naturally be the leader, especially since I'd always been working under her directives. Much to my surprise, though, she casually shook her head and took herself out of the running.

I looked at Chiyome next, but she also shook her head, making it clear where she stood on the matter.

"Well, if we're going to be going by the Turbulent Ponta Patrol, how about we make Ponta the leader?"

I hefted Ponta in both hands and held it in front of the man's face. Ponta let forth a mighty cry, ready to take on the duty.

"Kyii! Kyiii!!"

The man laughed, an amused smirk rising to his lips. “Well, uh, unfortunately we can’t exactly list an animal who can’t communicate what it wants, so...”

I glanced down at Ponta. As far as I was concerned, it was quite easy to understand what Ponta wanted, but I wasn’t in a position to cause undue hardship to the guild.

I puffed out my chest.

“All right then, I’ll serve as the substitute leader.”

“Kyii!”

The man, clearly tired now, wrote down my name as the group leader.

Once that was done, we were handed three bronze tags, each of which were relatively simple in design with the exception of the three spears etched on the front signifying our Third Rank status. There was a hole in the top of the tag which you could slip either a chain or string through to hang it from your neck or waist.

I was mumbling to myself about needing to find a leather strap or something later in the town market to hang the tag on, when the man suddenly spoke up once more, offering an assortment of chains and leather strips...all at extra cost, of course. He was quite the salesman. Sure, it would be cheaper to get one at the market, but the cost meant nothing to me.

I bought three leather strips and slipped the tags onto them. Once I hung the bronze tag from my neck, I instantly felt like an adventurer in a video game. Alas, I had yet to encounter anyone with the job title of adventurer here in this world.



Now that I really thought about it, though—from hunting monsters and bandits to collecting materials and hunting down items, there was very little adventure in what in-game adventurers actually did. If anything, you were generally serving as a hunter or mercenary, or maybe performing delivery jobs for craftsmen. The most adventurous job quest I could think of was exploring ruins and caves.

But if heading through wild fields and deep into forests without a map could be considered an adventure, then it was no exaggeration to say traveling anywhere in this world devoid of any properly documented maps was an adventure in its own right. In fact, even just walking around in this world that I knew nothing about could be described as a constant adventure. Looking at it that way, maybe I actually was an adventurer, even if not in title.

I handed the man a gold coin to pay the three-silver-coin fee for the leather strips. When he tried to hand me my change, I raised my hand to stop him and made one more request.

“Keep the change. In return, it’d be really helpful if you could think up a job that we could do to contribute to the guild.”

I looked down at the man across the counter from me. First off, we wanted to take a job where we could learn more about the city while simultaneously increasing our rank in the guild. But what kind of jobs could Turbulent Ponta Patrol do to raise us to Third Rank Silver? Not only were we a small party, but newly formed at that. There were likely few jobs available to us that would be considered immensely useful to the guild, but I figured paying some kind of finder’s fee might make that process a bit easier.

The man looked over the gold coin in his hand for a few moments before raising his head and meeting my gaze.

“I can’t really say that it pays well, but there’s a request that hasn’t met its quota of required people. How about it? The request is from an imperial office, so it’ll be a great contribution to the guild, to say nothing of the pay.”

The three of us exchanged glances and nodded in unison.

“Could you assign that job to us?”

Once we were done telling the story of what happened at the mercenary guild, Glenys cocked her head to the side. “So, what job did you ultimately agree to take?”

“We were told it’s a job protecting the chemists’ guild while they go hunting for materials,” I responded. “Apparently, some imperial researchers are running short on materials, so around twenty chemists or so will be sent out to the fields to gather supplies. Several mercenary groups are coming along to protect them.”

“Well, it sounds like you scored a big job for your first assignment.” Glenys smiled cheerfully, though she looked a bit surprised.

Perhaps it was thanks to the staff member, or just a stroke of luck that the quest was short a few people. Apparently, the pay wasn’t much to speak of, but since we were more interested in finding jobs which would contribute to the guild than focusing on money, I figured it would do us good to find more jobs like it in the future. With the group we’d put together, we should be able to pick up all kinds of unclaimed jobs, and hopefully gain some recognition from the guild for picking up jobs other groups wouldn’t touch.

Of course, that meant we had to do this job perfectly, or else it’d all be for naught.

Ariane finished her bean soup and stood. “We better head for the city if we want to make it in time to meet up with everyone.”

Ponta was the first to respond. “Kyii.”

Having licked its plate clean, it easily hopped up onto the table before bounding up Ariane’s shoulder, wrapping itself around her neck, and giving its tail a gentle wag.

“That’s right—they mentioned that we’d be doing a meet and greet with the other mercenary groups.” Chiyome also finished her breakfast, brought her hands together to thank Glenys, and then stood. Taking the hat hanging from the back of her chair, she pulled it down low over her head to ensure her ears were no longer visible.

I shoved the last of my sandwich into my mouth and slurped down the remaining soup. “Thanks for the breakfast, Glenys!”

“Of course. Now be careful out there.”

After picking up my sword and shield from where they sat in the corner of the room, I slung my coin-filled leather pouch around my waist and pulled my helmet down over my head in a well-practiced motion. Once done, I left the dining room.

Ariane and the others were already outside waiting for me as I descended the stairs and walked out the door into the garden.

“Ready to go?”

“Yep.”

“I am.”

“Kyii! Kyiii!!” After the two of them responded, Ponta gave a mew of its own before diving to the top of my helmet.

“Transport Gate!”

Upon casting my long-distance teleportation magic, a magical rune appeared at our feet. A moment later, we found ourselves on the second floor of the empty house in Rontestatt.

“The place seems empty.” Chiyome scanned our surroundings as soon as we teleported in before looking back up.

I nodded in agreement. I stepped out of the room, then suddenly recalled what we’d seen the day before.

“Hey, maybe we should check out that room.”

Ariane seemed confused about what I was getting at until we made our way downstairs and I grabbed the doorknob leading to the open hall. I opened the door and peeked into the massive room on the other side. It was absolutely silent and lined with large wooden cells, just like the day before. Nothing looked disturbed, suggesting that whoever put the cells there hadn’t been back yet.

“Huh, doesn’t look like anything’s changed.” Chiyome stuck her head into the

room after me and agreed.

“Seems that way.”

Ponta sniffed around at the air from atop my head, its nose twitching in an adorable way.

Just to be safe, we should probably find another site to use when teleporting out here. We continued discussing this as we left the building. Despite the early hour, there were quite a few people on the streets, lending a rather boisterous atmosphere to the world around us.

Ariane spoke from under the charcoal-gray cloak that fluttered with every step she took. “The meet-up spot was at the square in front of the northern gate, right?”

“I’m pretty sure that was it. I brought the proof of acceptance with me.”

I pulled out the wooden plaque I received from the guild staff the day before. It fit neatly within the palm of my hand and was simple in design, with only what I assumed was the job number written on it. This would serve as proof that we accepted the job when we showed it to the requestor at the meeting place. From what I’d heard, there were two other mercenary groups attending in addition to Turbulent Ponta Patrol.

I put away the plaque, asked a passerby for directions, and then headed down the street for around an hour or so before finally arriving at a wall so massive we could see nothing past it. As we got closer, I caught sight of an immense door.

There were a fair number of people in the square, though only one group stood out. What I assumed to be the mercenary group consisted of about thirty members, all outfitted in various types of weapons and armor. They were standing around four horse-drawn carts filled with approximately 20 unarmed workers dressed in work clothes. It seemed likely these were the people involved with our job.

At the center of the group was a figure who seemed to be managing the whole affair. Unlike all the others, this neatly dressed older gentleman had a scholarly look to him. Figuring he was in charge of the chemists’ guild that put

out this request, we made our way toward him.

“Sorry for getting here so late. We are from Turbulent Ponta Patrol, and the mercenary guild gave us the job of providing protection for the chemists.”

As I spoke, I showed the man the plaque. He looked up at me and then up at Ponta, though his eyes went wide for a moment in surprise when their eyes met. He then glanced over at Ariane and Chiyome as they came up from behind and I once again caught a look of surprise on his face.

He then flipped through the papers in his hand and ran his finger down a column of what I assumed was a list of names of attendees before furrowing his brow and letting out a sigh.

“The guild reached out to me, sure, but I didn’t really think a mercenary group with a name like that would actually show up. And her, she’s just a child. I’ll have you know that since I’m the one paying here, I have no desire to babysit anyone who can’t fight.”

The researcher arched an eyebrow and looked back up at me.

Everything he said was correct. Even if mercenaries’ strength came in numbers, Chiyome’s age and figure raised questions about what she could add. Making matters worse, we were a small, untested party, up against two mid-size mercenary groups. If we weren’t equally skilled, we wouldn’t be able to hold our own. And yet, one of us was a little girl with no apparent combat prowess to bring to the table. Of course he would be upset.

The fastest way to ease his concerns would be to show him what she could do. I glanced over at Chiyome. She silently drew the dagger from her waist, spinning it around in the palm of her hand like a baton before hurling it high up into the air. She caught it deftly out of the air as it fell back down to the earth and slid the dagger back into its scabbard at her waist.

A novice would have shredded their hands to ribbons if they tried that. She did it all effortlessly. The researcher gaped at the sight of her flawless knife skills, unable to hide his surprise.

Alas, not everyone was impressed.

A man in his mid-twenties spoke up in a mocking tone as he approached.

“Heh, ain’t nothing more than a circus trick. If you plan on performing, why don’t you get outta here and show off in the town square?”

Standing around 180 centimeters tall, he wore his black hair cropped close to his head. He had a prominent nose and freckles and was dressed in well-worn black leather armor that clung tightly to his muscular build. A long-handled war axe hung from his back.

I figured he was from one of the two mercenary groups coming along for this job. Standing behind him were several others dressed in similar black armor, all of them looking quite amused as they watched the ongoing exchange between us.

Chiyome put her hand on the handle of her dagger and fixed the man with a deadly glare. “Would you be impressed if I were to kill you here and now, then?”

“Heh, now that’s an interesting challenge! I guess you wouldn’t be talking to me that way if you knew that I’m Gramn, leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs. It looks like you’ve got some decent equipment, but I have my doubts about letting a Third Rank Bronze group protect anyone, let alone one with girls.”

The man calling himself Gramn, apparently the leader of a group known as the Black-Fanged Dogs, held up a guild tag—a silver tag etched with a double-bladed axe, marking him as a Second Rank Silver mercenary—as he sneered.

It might seem like a simple threat, but I figured those in this line of work couldn’t allow themselves to be insulted by other mercenaries—not if they wanted to keep getting jobs. Responding to his threat and showing him what we could really do was probably the easiest way to resolve this.

I drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg from my back and spun it around before driving the blade into the ground, slicing effortlessly through the stone at my feet. I then gripped the hilt with both hands, spread out my feet, and glared at Gramn.

“Hm, perhaps the three of us could help you find out which of the black dogs are pups and which are the real thing. What do you think?”

“We’re the Black-Fanged Dogs!! You got guts, old man!”

My challenge set Gramn off, which in turn seemed to incite all the men behind him, as they each grabbed for their weapons. Realizing the impending danger, the researcher looked around wildly for someone to help him.

Finally, two members of the other mercenary group stepped in to lend a hand.

“C’mon, let’s put those away. You guys can fight in front of a requestor all you want, but you’re just going to damage the guild’s reputation if you start fighting over who’s weaker. Try to have a little self-awareness, huh?”

He was a tall, young man with blue eyes and blond hair tied back into a ponytail. He wore lightweight gleaming armor with a dark hue to it, and a half-cloak depicting a beast being run through with a short sword on it, serving as a flag of sorts for his mercenary group. At his waist was an elaborately decorated longsword, giving him the impression of a true, dyed-in-the-wool knight—much like the kind that everyone mistook me for.

Dangling from his neck was a golden tag marked with a single sword—meaning he had reached Gold level, the highest available at the guild.

A tall woman wearing something like a white hijab stood silently behind the blond-haired, blue-eyed knight. She had jet-black hair, tanned skin, and cold azure eyes. She wore similar lightweight armor to the man, though she was armed with two short swords hanging from her lower back and a long, curved blade with an intricately decorated hilt hanging from her waist.

Tri-blade wielding? No way. Those must be her main and secondary weapons.

The woman’s attention had remained fixed on Chiyome from the moment she arrived. Chiyome silently returned her gaze.

Gramn merely clucked his tongue at their appearance. “Hngh, and who would dare speak up to the guild’s best boy and leader of the Silver Blades?”

The young knight responded to Gramn’s open hostility with a charming smile, as if nothing were wrong.

“I’m just trying to keep you from getting hurt, you know. My chief here told me that you don’t stand a chance against that girl.”

Gramn's eyes went wide at this and he fixed the tall woman with an angry glare. Apparently, she was the second in command of the group.

“Whaddya say?! You sayin’ I’d lose to this little girl??”



A vein in Gramn's forehead bulged as he shouted his abuse, but the young knight merely frowned at this.

"Being a woman's got nothing to do with it. Have you already forgotten who my Meel here beat so effortlessly at his own game? If you keep damaging your reputation like this, it's going to become all the harder for the Black-Fanged Dogs to ever reach First Rank Silver."

He finished with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders, though all Gramn could do was clench his fist in silence.

After a few moments, it seemed as if Gramn had finally backed down. He spat on the ground and stomped back toward the carts, his men in tow.

The researcher let out a loud sigh, immensely relieved to see the hostilities end, and turned toward the leader of the Silver Blades before bowing his head in appreciation.

"Thank you, Brad. We are immensely grateful that the mercenary guild would send along a First Rank Gold group such as the Silver Blades at a discount for this request. To say nothing of you leading the group yourself."

The young man smiled at the researcher's words.

"I volunteered for this request when the guild announced it as a matter of personal interest, which also allowed me to lower our rate. I'm very happy to be able to make the acquaintance of a new and talented mercenary group."

"Talented?" A dubious look washed across the researcher's face as he glanced over at me.

Brad continued to smile, responding with a firm nod. "My chief, Meel, has a keen eye for this sort of thing. According to her, all three of these people are incredibly gifted. And if that's what Meel thinks, then I'm willing to stake the reputation of the Silver Blades on it."

The researcher's voice trembled, as if deeply impressed by Brad's words. "Well, they must really be something for you to say that! In that case, I think it's all but assured that we'll have no trouble carrying out this task. All right then, let's get this started."

With that, the researcher bowed his head to Brad and headed toward the carts. After seeing him off, I turned toward the two Silver Blades.

“I apologize for the trouble we caused.”

Brad merely shrugged at my apology.

“Mercenaries tend to be a rough bunch. Besides, it wouldn’t look good for the guild if you guys wiped the floor with them. We were just acting in our own interests, so there’s no need to offer apology or thanks.”

He smiled and offered up his right hand, which I took in mine.

“I’m Brad, leader of the Silver Blades. This here is my chief, Meel.”

After his own introduction, he glanced over toward Meel. She met my gaze but continued to stand there in silence.

Chiyome, however, seemed greatly interested in this woman. I kept an eye on my young counterpart as I retrieved my sword from the ground and placed it on my back before introducing us and our newly founded mercenary group.

“I’m Arc, and this is the Turbulent Ponta Patrol. We created this mercenary group just yesterday.”

“Kyii!” Ponta introduced itself with a mew, puffing out its chest, right after my own introduction. Perhaps it was responding to the mention of Ponta Patrol?

The other two provided their own abbreviated introductions in kind.

“I’m Ariane.”

“Chiyome.”

Meel’s pupils narrowed slightly at the sound of their names. Seemingly unaware, Brad beamed and tilted his head to the side at this.

“What an interesting name. I suppose you’re the leader?”

He fixed his gaze on me as he spoke. I responded by pulling Ponta down from the top of my helmet.

“Actually, Ponta is our leader.”

Ponta batted its front legs playfully in the air at this and mewed excitedly.

“Kyii!”

This seemed to have left Brad at a loss for words. To someone who took his mercenary craft seriously, this exchange was probably too bizarre to comprehend.

“I’m serving as his substitute,” I added.

Brad seemed to have figured out what I was getting at after a moment and loudly cleared his throat to refocus the conversation.

“You’re certainly a unique group. This isn’t the first time Meel has immediately recognized the talent of someone I’d never heard of before, but I don’t think we’ve ever met, have we? I’m certain I wouldn’t have forgotten you if we had. Are you not from here?”

It was clear that he’d been completely serious when he said he’d vouch for us based on Meel’s word alone. In that case, the woman standing behind him must have quite the eye for talent. Was it some kind of supernatural ability? Or were gifted fighters just able to pick each other out of a crowd? I certainly hadn’t reached that level of skill yet, so the concept was completely beyond me.

Although we’d found ourselves in a fairly large city, mercenary circles ran small. This influential member of that mercenary world was unfortunately right on the mark.

I told Brad the same story of how we’d come to the city that I gave at the mercenary guild the day prior.

“We arrived here only quite recently, having served as bodyguards for a merchant from Rhoden. I heard things have been rough here of late, so we decided to join the guild to see if it could earn us a bit more freedom.”

Brad didn’t seem to find anything suspicious with my story. He nodded his head once, seemingly convinced.

“I see. Mercenaries from other countries coming here isn’t all that uncommon. We get a lot of mercenaries from Soowihn up to the north, but Rhoden is another story altogether.”

Though he spoke with a smile, it was clear that this mercenary group leader

was well informed of the surrounding geography and neighboring countries. If he asked too many questions about the neighboring lands, I knew he'd get me to spill the beans. It seemed best for me to change the topic as soon as possible.

"And, uh, this was Meel, right? You must have quite the eye to be able to tell at a glance how talented Ariane and Chiyome really are. I mean, sure, I was showing off a bit, but them? Chiyome often gets underestimated, and, uh..."

I trailed off with a chuckle.

Meel's gaze ever-so-slightly turned toward me before she bowed her head in acknowledgement of my compliment. Brad laughed and spoke on his silent partner's behalf.

"I may not be on her level, but even I could tell that you're different from the usual novice mercenaries we encounter. Careful—if you're too humble, people might think you're making fun of them."

I glanced over at Ariane. Judging by the unimpressed expression on her face, she wanted to say something. Apparently, she disagreed with something I'd said earlier...but practically speaking, there wasn't much difference in skill level between the three of us when you took into account that we wouldn't be using magic or special fighting techniques. In that sense, I hadn't lied.

While I was lost in my own thoughts, I saw Meel lean over and whisper something to Brad.

"It looks like the requestor's ready."

Brad nodded in response. "Shall we get going, then?"

He turned on his heel and returned to his group.

After seeing them off, Ariane crossed her arms, looked up at me, and finally let me have it. "If you're just a showoff, then what does that make me? And Chiyome?"

Ariane looked back at Chiyome for support but got no response. The young girl was still oddly transfixed by Meel, staring at her back.

"Hmm?"

“Kyii?” Even Ponta seemed curious about her reaction.

“What is it, Chiyome?”

She finally pulled her gaze away from the retreating figures to look back at me.

“No, I was just thinking that you, and of course Ariane and I as well, should avoid using any kind of showy magic or techniques in front of people. That woman, the chief, the way she was watching us reminded me of how we work as spies. Maybe she’s just scouting out talent for the group, but I think we should be careful around her.”

Ariane furrowed her brow at Chiyome’s suspicions. “Do you think she’s suspicious of us?”

I was wondering the same, though Chiyome shook her head at this.

“I don’t know. She’s a leader of one of the best mercenary groups in town, so maybe she’s just cautious around new people. In any case, it seems that we’ve caught their attention.”

I turned my gaze back toward the retreating Silver Blades.

We were planning to sneak around the empire, but now that we’d already caught the attention of some big names in the mercenary industry, we’d have to be careful how we acted within the guild going forward. If our identities were uncovered, it was highly possible that information would make its way to the fleeing cardinals.

Now that I thought about it, though...the combination of a mysterious sword-wielding beauty, a petite girl decked out in weaponry, and myself, a hulk outfitted in intricately designed body armor wearing a spirit animal on his helmet, was all but assured to draw attention no matter what we did. This was going to make it trickier to search for the cardinals in this city than I’d expected.

These thoughts continued to run through my head as we hurried toward the researcher, who was busily making his final checks at the center of the square.

Apparently, the chemists we were escorting were headed to the forests at the

base of the mountain range northeast of the city. That was where the materials they sought grew in the wild. Though the forest wasn't terribly deep, heading into the mountains alone was apparently tantamount to suicide, thanks to the monsters that roamed the mountainside.

With nearly thirty escorts in tow, however, spirits were high and the mood surprisingly relaxed. It seemed unlikely any monsters would show up against those odds.

"The pay may be low, but getting paid to just sit around and watch some people for half a day is fine by me!"

"Can't hurt to earn some booze money before things really heat up with Aspania, huh? Gyahaha!"

The two men talking were members of the Black-Fanged Dogs. They were walking alongside the carts, without a single care for their surroundings, as it made its way along a barely visible rut leading toward the forest.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Silver Blades moved in formation ahead of the carts, vigilant and with their hands on their weapons. Meel was walking out in front of the formation, almost as if to provide an example for the others. Honestly, the Silver Blades reminded me less of mercenaries and more of a military contingent, though I supposed that might very well be the difference between a First Rank Gold and Second Rank Silver group. If I were a local noble and needed to hire mercenaries to handle a dispute with a neighboring country, I'd definitely want to cough up the extra money to retain a group like the Silver Blades.

The newly formed Third Rank Bronze mercenary group, Turbulent Ponta Patrol, was all the way at the back of the formation. It was thanks to this positioning that I could analyze both groups with such care. Brad had decided how to situate everyone.

Ariane sighed, the annoyance clear in her voice. "Those guys are way too relaxed. I have no idea why they relegated us to the back of the formation."

Chiyome spoke up from her position next to Ariane, clearly in agreement. "That's right. Usually, you want the strongest people in the front and back of your formation. I was sure the leader of the Black Dogs would object when Brad

announced that they would take the center.”

Gramn, the leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs, might have looked annoyed. But he wasn't acting hostile toward us anymore, occupying himself instead with joking around with his comrades. Based on his behavior, he had no idea what the arrangement Chiyome mentioned actually meant.

If the man who was so intent on not being seen to be beneath us back in the town square truly understood, he would have been the first to oppose Brad's proposal. Although I'd only known them a short time, I could easily imagine how we'd gotten here.

“Well, I guess he just wanted the easy job in the middle.” I shrugged and was met with a sympathetic mew from atop my helmet.

“Kyii!”

Strictly speaking, I wasn't particularly good at reading the room, so it didn't really make much difference where I was placed. Though I might be a skeleton with no actual eyes, I had good eyesight that would prove useful in a wide-open area. Unfortunately, the trees all around us made visibility poor. The only reason we were back here at all was most likely because the chief of the Silver Blades recognized Ariane and Chiyome's sheer skill.

If we planned to avoid using showy magic or combat techniques in front of people while we were hunting down the cardinals, however, that left me to rely on my brute strength alone. I should probably work at being useful for things other than my teleportation magic.

About two hours after leaving the city limits, we were faced with the sight of an ominous forest. There were no paths for the carts to take, so the workers hefted large baskets onto their backs and spread out into the forest.

It had been explained to us back in the town square that the contract dictated half the mercenaries entering the forest would also carry baskets, but the members of the Black-Fanged Dogs now balked when handed theirs.

“Gimme a break, how can we protect anyone if we're carrying junk on our backs?”

They did have a point.

If the escorts were slowed by baggage, it could endanger the very chemists' guild members whom they were here to protect. However, these were the terms outlined in the contract. Both the requestor and the accepting party must have agreed to those terms when accepting the job.

The leader of the Silver Blades fixed the Black-Fanged Dogs' leader with a cool gaze.

"It's your job as leader to inform your people of the job details when accepting it. If you still have issues with this, then our members will take your place and you can stay here and guard the carts. Okay?"

The two men glared at each other for a moment, tension beginning to build, before Gramn averted his gaze.

"Gah, this is your job, ya hear?! If any of you idiots keep complaining, you'll only get half pay!"

With that, Gramn shoved his assigned baskets toward nearby members of his group. While that was going on, I hurried over toward the members of the chemists' guild.

Brad smirked at Gramn's back before turning to me and handing us our baskets. "Sorry to do this to such a small group, but this is what was requested of us."

He handed me two baskets.

"I'll carry one, Arc."

Chiyome immediately volunteered herself, but I merely shook my head. I threw one basket over my back and put the other under my arm.

"Nah, I think it's best for me to carry these by myself. Besides, it could prove beneficial for the two of you to be unencumbered while playing escort in the forest."

Ariane agreed. "Arc likes to show off, so we might as well let him carry the baskets."

"Just leave the physical work to me."

She shot a puzzled look my way at that and sighed.

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean. I looked toward Chiyome for an explanation, but she merely shrugged and urged us to join those getting ready to enter the forest.

“What’s that all about?”

As I watched my two companions head off, I received an equally confused mew from Ponta, along with a gentle swing of its tail.

“Kyii?”

Finally, the researcher who was the leader of the chemists’ guild gave us the order.

“We’re about to head out!”

With that, the members formed up and headed into the forest toward their objective with Meel, chief of the Silver Blades, and the researcher from the chemists’ guild up in the front. Apparently, he was going to lead the way to the harvesting spot.

The rest of the formation remained largely unchanged. There were no proper paths in the forest and we were limited to walking in pairs along animal trails. To give themselves room to use their weapons in the event of a monster attack, the mercenaries were placed in between small groups of chemists’ guild members.

The Turbulent Ponta Patrol, however, had apparently been dismissed from our escort duties by the members of the Black-Fanged Dogs, leaving the three of us to continue holding up the rear. Well, at least it was easier work, since all we needed to do was keep an eye out until we arrived.

Chiyome, who was walking immediately in front of me, suddenly started to look behind us. I glanced back as well before asking her what was up.

“Something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that I’m not so sure about leaving half of the Silver Blades’ members behind. I know someone needs to watch over the carts, but they’re so skilled...”

I nodded along, bringing my hand to my chin in thought as I looked at the

head of the formation.

There were six members of the Silver Blades, including Brad and Meel, up front. We'd left around seven members back at the entrance of the forest to watch over the carts. If, as she mentioned, our job was to provide an escort, then it did make sense to have the more skilled Silver Blades provide protection while the Black-Fanged Dogs stood guard.

However, even if the Silver Blades were highly ranked by comparison, the Black-Fanged Dogs weren't too shabby themselves at a Second Rank Silver. Though there were certainly unimaginable monsters in this forest, based on what I'd heard, they were nowhere near as dangerous as those which inhabited the Great Canada Forest or the Black Forest down in the southern continent.

In that case, the Black-Fanged Dogs should be sufficiently skilled for the job.

"Maybe the Silver Blades are just giving their juniors, the Black-Fanged Dogs, an opportunity to show their stuff? Since the Silver Blades already have the highest rank attainable in the city."

Ariane, bringing up the rear behind me, seemed convinced by this.

"It's the same in our village. We give inexperienced warriors more active roles and have skilled warriors stand by. This doesn't seem strange to me."

Chiyome furrowed her brow at Ariane's explanation. "Hmm, I guess that's a possibility," she mumbled to herself.

Since the mercenaries were an independent force hired for money, they were quite different from the warriors who protected the villages of the Great Canada Forest. But it didn't seem out of the question for Brad to look out for the other men.

"Well, we're just interlopers, so best to not worry about it and focus on our job here in the rear."

My two comrades quickly agreed with my assessment and went back to watching our surroundings.

We continued walking deeper and deeper into the forest for some time.

With no signs of any monsters coming to attack us, our hike up the gently

sloping mountain path, surrounded by the chirping of birds, began to feel like we were off on a picnic. Ponta grew tired after a while and curled up in the bottom of one of the baskets, snoring gently.

Eventually, the party arrived in a clearing where the trees were more spread out. I watched as everyone relaxed and took a breather, refreshed by the gentle breeze coming down from the mountain. Unlike the rest of the trail we'd followed up through the forest at the base of the mountain, this place looked more like a gentle hill covered in short grass, with a clear view of our surroundings. It was the perfect place to take a break.

Suddenly, the researcher said something to Meel. She nodded in response before turning to Brad. From how they were acting, it looked as if we'd arrived at our destination.

As if on cue, Brad proved me right by turning around after hearing Meel's report and issuing a command.

"We've arrived at our destination. We'll rest in shifts, and then the chemists will begin their work. While that's going on, I want you to keep an eye on your surroundings and perform your role as escorts. Your individual sectors are as follows..."

As he went on to explain, there would be four sectors of responsibility: north, south, east, and west. Each group was assigned a sector. The Black-Fanged Dogs would watch over both the north and east sectors, as they had more members. The Silver Blades would watch the south, and the Turbulent Ponta Patrol would be responsible for the west.

The chemists needed the large baskets I was carrying for their work, so I would be handing them over now, but then be responsible for carrying them again on the way back. It seemed they were collecting some kind of medicinal herb, so I didn't imagine they'd be terribly heavy, even when full.

"Nap time's over, Ponta."

"Kyuuun."

Ponta let out a tremendous yawn as I picked it up by the scruff of the neck and handed the empty basket to the chemists' guild members.

At Ariane's direction, Ponta and I went to stand watch at a spot where the clearing met the forest, while she and Chiyome went into the forest to search for any threatening monsters.

Considering our skill sets, this was the most reasonable proposal. If we were going to avoid using special fighting techniques and magic as much as possible, then I could serve as a wall by holding back any monsters that came into our space with my shield and stabbing them with my sword. Besides, the big sword on my back would be impractical to use in the forest.

With Ponta in charge of looking for any threats, we together were about as good as one whole person.

"We're going to go look around the forest, okay, Arc? I doubt anything will happen, but we'll call for you if a monster comes and we need any help."

With that, Ariane and Chiyome slipped silently into the forest.

After waving goodbye, I set my bags down at my feet, drew my sword and spread my legs out into a stable posture and then leaned down on my sword for support as I gazed out into the forest.

The wind rustled down the gently sloping mountain, causing the trees in front of me to sway in the wind. I could hear the members of the chemists' guild dispatched by the empire working busily behind me, but it all began to feel worlds away as I became entranced by the sound of the wind.

"Kyuun."

Ponta also seemed to be enjoying the breeze, stretching out its tiny body. I took that as a sign it hadn't picked up on any noteworthy threats in the area.

However, no matter how good of a danger sensor Ponta may be, it was clear it would be to my benefit if I could detect threats on my own in the future. Glenys often said as much to me during our training sessions in Lalatoya, but it wasn't a skill you picked up overnight. I would just have to use opportunities like this to hone my observation skills.

With that in mind, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and listened to my surroundings.

According to those who could actually sense the presence of others, it was completely unlike sight, sound, and smell. Such an abstract description was hard to process for a former human being who lived until recently in a science-based society.

Perhaps I should give up while I'm ahead. It's not like I have any skin to sense a prickly sensation on to begin with.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I suddenly heard the sound of flowing water off in the distance. Figuring it was just the flow of a nearby river, I turned my attention back to the forest spreading out before me and tried to focus on picking up a sign of Ariane or Chiyome.

Anyone who saw me probably thought I was napping, but I was completely serious. I furrowed my brow and groaned under my breath as I fought to sense their presence. However, after about a dozen or so minutes of that, my focus began to wane and I decided to take a break. Just as I was about to give up, I felt a troubled presence off in the distance.

Ponta, too, broke its silence and suddenly stood at attention.

“Kyii!”

I decided to finish up my practice there and turned my gaze in the direction of the disturbance, curious as to what had happened.

Next, I heard men screaming from the depths of the forest off to the northeast. The trees shook violently, birds resting in their branches took off in unison, and a thunderous, bestial roar echoed from the depths of the forest. It sounded nothing like the screams of the men from moments ago.

A moment later, I witnessed what looked like a black shadow burst from the depths of the forest and land in the clearing with an ominous squelch. The reddish-black figure was a mere piece of a grotesquely mutilated human.

The black armor still attached to the man identified him as a member of the Black-Fanged Dogs, though judging by the amount of torn flesh hanging off him, this was only his upper torso. Perhaps whatever attacked him had blown away his upper body, leaving his lower half in the forest.

With that much physical damage, healing or even revival would be difficult. In

any case, using revival magic in front of all these people would make any future activities increasingly difficult.

“Waaaaaugh!!”

One of the members of the chemists’ guild who had been working in the area screamed, causing all the other members to throw their baskets and make a run for it.

Just then, members of the Black-Fanged Dogs came running out of the forest, a thunderous roar echoing behind them. They might not be the best out there, but a Silver-Rank mercenary group wouldn’t be so easily annihilated by a threat lurking in the forest.

Finally, a muscular monster with the head of a bull and body of a man—a minotaur—standing nearly three meters tall lunged through the shrubs in hot pursuit of the running men. It wielded a rugged club the size of a grown man, its tip dyed crimson. It was undoubtedly the one who had smashed apart the body of the Black-Fanged Dog earlier.

Its bloodshot eyes darted about, searching for its next victim.

The minotaur’s gaze came to rest on one of the escaping mercenaries. It kicked the man to the ground with one huge hoof and jumped impossibly high into the air with club in hand, swinging it right down onto the mercenary’s head. The giant club hit its mark, spraying the surrounding area with a thick coat of fresh blood and causing the earth to shake as we heard the unpleasant sound of crunching bone.

In the face of such overwhelming tragedy, the chemists’ guild members—and even the mercenaries who were supposed to be their escorts—seemed to lose heart and screamed out in despair.

Gramn, leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs, let his escaping men have it.

“Your worthless chumps! You dare call yourselves members of the Black-Fanged Dogs and wear our silver tag on your necks?! He may be a big brute, but now he’s out in the open! Let him have it!! Shields to the front, spearmen and archers to the back! Find your target and don’t let ’em get away!”

Holding his war axe at the ready, he glared straight ahead at the massive

minotaur. The monster's fangs curled upward in an ominous smile.

Spurred on by the force of their leader's will, the escaping mercenaries readied their weapons and began to pull together into formation.

The first to move were the mercenaries wielding large shields. The men let forth a mighty roar to psych themselves up and drew their swords in their free hand, striking violently at the minotaur to draw its attention. When the provoked minotaur turned to the shield-bearing mercenaries, it began to lunge toward them, swinging its huge club around.

Next, the spearmen and archers drew close in a large semicircle surrounding the minotaur so they could coordinate their movements. The spearmen threw their spears as the archers released their arrows. Faced with a massive, three-meter-tall opponent, it was easy for these Silver-Rank mercenaries to hit their mark. A number of spears and arrows pierced the minotaur's hide, successfully drawing blood.

"Gwooooooaaaar!!"

However, none of the strikes were critical. The spears only managed to embed themselves to about halfway up their metal tips, while the arrows popped free of the minotaur's muscles as it tensed up and roared in rage. With the creature's attention once again on them, the surrounding mercenaries took several fearful steps backward.

However, one of the shield-wielding mercenaries took advantage of the minotaur's lapse in attention and thrust his sword into his opponent's abdomen.

"Gwoooooaaaaaar!!"

The blade was stopped by the minotaur's thick muscles, once again failing to deliver a fatal blow, but it still seemed to do better than the previous attacks. The angered minotaur snorted and tried to bat away the shield-wielding mercenary with its club. The man let go of his sword and used his large shield to deflect the club's blow, but it was still strong enough that it caused him to lose his footing and fall backward.

The minotaur stepped forward to press the attack, but Gramn dove in with his

huge battle axe before he could.

“Not a chance, ya ugly brute!”

The words hadn't even left his mouth when Gramn's battle axe roared through the air toward the minotaur. He swung the axe upward, leaving a gash in the minotaur from his abdomen to neck. A blast of fresh blood sprayed out over Gramn.

Gramn rotated his wrist and once again turned the battle axe's blade toward his opponent, though the minotaur showed no fear. He gritted his teeth and swung his club down to Gramn.

“Damn!”

It seemed Gramn had intended to throw his opponent off balance and follow up with another blow to his body, but his blow simply didn't exert enough force against his heavyweight opponent. On the contrary, he'd thrown himself right into the minotaur's range. Gramn managed to deflect the minotaur's blow with his axe handle, but the impact forced him to his knees.

It was now the minotaur's turn to follow through. If it connected with Gramn, this would surely prove fatal. As the creature's club swung down, however, it was forcefully knocked away with a high-pitched metallic clang.

“Gwaaaauuurgh?!”

I'd deflected it with my Holy Shield of Teutates.

It took me some time to join the fray after the minotaur first made its appearance, since I didn't want to draw any attention up here in the empire by using my teleportation magic. But I did manage to save Gramn. It was probably humiliating for him to have been saved by a newcomer, but this was a great opportunity for me to show off my abilities in front of an audience. The only way to get the Silver-grade mercenary license we needed to leave the city would be to demonstrate our skills and build up a track record.

With that in mind, the minotaur was a perfect opponent.

“Hmm, it's weaker than the man-spiders.”

I checked that I still had feeling in my left hand before catching another blow

from the minotaur. Next, I used my shield to slam him with a body blow.

“Bwoooooaaaaargh?!”

The minotaur looked shocked by the force of the blow, its hulking three-meter frame arching backward.

With a swing of my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, I lopped off one of his arms. It, along with the massive club, tumbled to and stained the ground a bright red as it thumped heavily down.

“Bwaaaaaaauuuuuugh!!!!!!”

The minotaur dropped to its knees and belted out an anguished roar, holding the open wound with its other hand. Blood spurted from the injury. If left as it was, the minotaur would bleed out in short order. However, it was still fully capable of crushing people with ease. I couldn't just leave it alone.

I repositioned the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg to ready it for the final blow, but before I could move, I saw Gramn lunge past me.

“Gyaaaaaaaah!!”

He swung his battle axe with all his might. The blade found its mark on the minotaur's neck and buried itself halfway into its flesh. Not missing a beat, Gramn yanked the battle axe out, sending a red fountain of blood spewing forth from the minotaur's nape, drenching him in the monster's blood.

The minotaur slumped to the ground, unmoving. Gramn rested his foot on the bull head and fixed me with an angry glare, pointing his battle axe right at me.

“Mind your own business!”

Though he was breathing heavily, Gramn still seemed like he could stay in the fight and clearly seemed to believe I'd overstepped my boundaries. It would be easy to provoke him then and there, but I had to keep in mind that fanning the flames now could cause problems for us back in the city.

“I'm really sorry, Gramn. I just really wanted to prove myself, as part of a newly formed group. Maybe you could overlook it this once, as a newbie eager for success?”

I slid my sword back into my scabbard and slumped my shoulders. Gramn glared back at me, the wrinkles in his forehead deepening, but we were suddenly interrupted by the cheerful voice of a young man calling out to us.

“Could you guys cut it out for now? If this situation’s been settled, I’d like everyone to get back to work. As the leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs, I believe it’s your duty to take whatever final actions are needed in light of the fact that you’ve suffered casualties.”

Though his voice was cheerful, Brad fixed Gramn with a cool gaze. The two glared at one another for a few moments before Gramn averted his gaze in annoyance and urged the crowd forming around him to leave.

Apparently, they needed to bring the body of the minotaur’s victim back to the city. Watching Gramn give instructions on dealing with the injured, it was clear he really was a Silver-grade leader. Still, I could feel something broken from the group as they mourned the loss of their comrade.

Brad turned to me as I watched the activity.

“Even with all that heavy equipment on, you were able to get there in time to catch the blow. I couldn’t have pulled that off, despite my lighter armor, even if I moved the moment I noticed something amiss. What’s more, you managed to block a strike from a minotaur, a monster renowned for its strength, with just one hand. There’s something special about you. I want you in my group.”

Though his lips were smiling, his eyes were cold. Maybe he was sizing me up, or just plain suspicious. In any case, if I meant to achieve Silver rank as a mercenary, it was only a matter of time before I drew some attention to myself.

Maybe it was best to just go for it? I responded with a chuckle and flexed my bicep.

“I’m the strongest of our group. Even a dragon couldn’t break through my guard.”

I felt like an overconfident braggart, but I wasn’t lying. Ponta mewed with confidence to match as it continued to wrap itself around my neck.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

Suddenly, I heard a voice call out from me. “I guess you sorted out that problem, Arc?”

Ariane frowned as she walked over toward me, sword in hand, and looked down at the fallen minotaur. Chiyome stood by her side. Perhaps she’d heard the chaos and ended her forest patrol early to rush back.

“The mercenaries suffered some casualties, but I was able to put down the threat. All that’s left is to see if there are any other minotaurs.”

Chiyome looked around at our surroundings for a moment before shaking her head. “I don’t sense anything big in the vicinity.”

Brad smiled at her remark.

“So you can sense monsters, huh? You’re just as gifted as our Meel, then. I’d like to invite you to join our group. It never hurts to have more skilled people working with you.”

“Kyii!”

For some reason, Ponta proudly puffed up at Brad’s words, almost as if it were direct praise. To be fair, Ponta was superior even to Chiyome in terms of its ability to detect monsters, so in that sense, it would be a great member.

I stroked the fur under Ponta’s chin as I asked Brad something that had been bothering me. “Do minotaurs often appear in this forest?”

The Black-Fanged Dogs’ attitude up until now made me wonder. It would be unreasonable to think that Silver-ranked mercenaries based out of Rontestatt would have no idea what kind of monsters inhabited the surrounding forests. If they did know they were going into a forest inhabited by dangerous minotaurs, then they wouldn’t have been so carefree earlier.

In that case, then that meant that the minotaur we’d encountered wasn’t native to these woods.

Brad thought for a moment about my theory and scratched his head.

“I’ve never heard of a minotaur in this forest. Well, I have heard that it’s a species that will chase its prey over long distances, so it may have ended up here from somewhere else.”

Meel stepped up silently behind Brad and shook her head before whispering something in his ear. He nodded and then turned his attention back to me.

“Well, the threat is gone for now, so you guys can go back to working in your sector. It seems none of the chemists were harmed, so we will continue with the task at hand.”

He and Meel went back to their sector. The members of the Black-Fanged Dogs looked despondent as they dealt with the cleanup, but they were hired help too, and they had no choice but to return to their duties as requested by the client.

“Should we head back?”

Ponta wagged its tail and responded from its place around my neck. “Kyii.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like there’s anything left for us to do.”

With that said, Ariane turned her gaze away from the Black-Fanged Dogs and went back the way she came. Chiyome followed close behind, though her gaze remained fixed on the two members of the Silver Blades.

There was something about Meel that drew her attention. Unsure what it was that she was so interested in, I too turned toward the chief, only to accidentally meet her gaze. It only lasted a moment, however, and didn’t happen again.

Despite the trouble we’d encountered, we made it back safely to our home base of Rontestatt after completing the quest, though it was after dark by the time we returned. The chemists were anxious after the attack, causing them to work slowly, but they gradually picked up the pace once the Silver Blades hanging back to guard them were replaced with Black-Fanged Dogs. As expected, there was something to be said about the dependability of a Gold-Rank mercenary group.

Gramn seemed displeased with pretty much everything the Silver Blades did, but he performed his duties without causing any further trouble. The chaos made the chemists’ work take longer, delaying our return. As a result, we missed the curfew for reentering the city, but there were special exceptions made for quest-givers in the imperial government, and so we were allowed back in.

Once we were back in the city and the job was completed, we parted ways with the chemists. The hired mercenaries were disbanded, leaving only the leaders behind. Each leader would then return to the mercenary guild to report on the completion of the task.

“The guild is already closed by now, so I’ll report tomorrow morning. The pay should be available around noon, so don’t forget to drop by to pick it up.”

Gramn clucked his tongue in annoyance at the smiling Brad and turned on his heel before leaving.

After seeing him off, Brad turned to me.

“I’ll tell the guild about what you did. You won’t go to Silver Rank right away, of course, but with our support, you’ll definitely be promoted to First Grade Bronze.”

“I wouldn’t dare impose. Are you sure that’s okay?”

I was grateful, but also curious about his intentions. I had mentioned before that we were aiming to achieve Silver rank so we could leave the city at will, but only because that had nothing to do with them.

Brad smiled slyly, perhaps picking up on my suspicion. “I have no ulterior motives. This is merely a legitimate evaluation of your ability. It’s hard for a small group of Third Rank Bronze mercenaries to find any good jobs, but things could change, depending on your ability, if you achieve First Rank. We need more talented mercenaries here in Rontestatt.”

Meel appeared out of nowhere and approached her smiling companion to whisper something into his ear. Brad nodded and looked back at me.

“Well, let’s call it a day. I’m looking forward to seeing you again.”

He and Meel then disappeared down one of the darkened, empty streets.

After seeing him off, I looked over to Ariane and Chiyome, who stood at my side. “Let’s go back to the village. It’s gotten pretty late.”

Ariane stretched out her sore muscles. “I want to hurry home and take a bath.”

Chiyome nodded in agreement, a sleepy Ponta dangling from her arms.

And with that, we'd successfully completed our first day as mercenaries. Fortunately, we'd gotten off to a good start, and it seemed the day's activities would pay off, with a generous promotion within the guild. If only I could say the same about rapidly finding clues to the cardinals' location, too...

Sensing that they'd walked far enough, Meel glanced over her shoulder. Sharp blue eyes peered through the gaps in the cloth concealing her face.

After confirming that the armored knights were no longer in sight, Meel quickly hurried ahead to Brad and voiced her question.

"Mr. Brad, do you really need to go to the trouble of helping those whom we do not truly know?"

Brad smiled a little at her question, though his back remained facing her.

"You've got it backward. I'm helping them precisely *because* I don't know who they are. They are undoubtedly the most, or at least second-most talented mercenaries within the city. If these people can aid our plans to leave Rontestatt, I see no problem with helping them do so."

He stopped and turned around, squinting up at the moon in the darkened sky. The pale moon shining through the blackness reflected off his blue eyes, which shimmered suspiciously in its light.

"However, whether we must treat them as hostile will depend on which happens first—they reaching Silver Rank and leaving the city, or our plans going into motion. We'll need to keep an eye on them."

Meel nodded silently at Brad's response.

"That the Black Fang's casualties were minor was without a doubt due to their efforts. I fear they may further impede our plans. I will put out the order to uncover their true identities so we can explore options to dispose of them."

Brad nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure you already know, but they are also quite talented. I don't mind you digging deeper, but be careful not to draw suspicion. Proceed with care, and do not risk the execution of our plan."

He smiled into the darkness and began walking again. Meel bowed in response before silently disappearing into the night.

It was around noon the following day when we finally arrived in Rontestatt.

Ponta sat atop my helmet as per usual and Ariane and Chiyome stood at my sides. The town squares and city streets were bustling with people and were filled with various stalls from which wafted the appetizing smells of the meals and snacks they sold. Though I'd already had lunch back at the village, my eyes still wandered as we walked through the city. Maybe I wasn't full yet?

Ariane glanced at me and jabbed her elbow into my side to urge me ahead.

"C'mon Arc. First, we need to go to the guild and then figure out our next plan of action."

She hurried on ahead and I had to pick up the pace to keep up.

We originally hadn't planned to wait until payment was issued at noon, intending instead to come to the city in the morning to look for clues pertaining to the cardinals. But Chiyome mentioned yesterday that she wanted to stop in at the village currently under construction, and I had to use my teleportation magic to pick her up in the morning.

"Sorry for making everyone late because of my personal business." Chiyome dropped her gaze to the ground after watching the interaction between Ariane and me, but I simply shook my head.

"No worries. We needed to be here around noon to pick up our pay for yesterday's job, anyway, so you have nothing to apologize for. Besides, there haven't been any major developments in our investigation."

Even Ariane agreed with me.

"That's right. Right now, our priority is to gather information in the city and secure the means to get out, so there's no need to rush. How was your errand, anyway?" She tilted her head to the side and looked back at Chiyome.

"Progress on the village seems to be going well. If we keep this pace up, we will be able to welcome the next group of settlers earlier than planned."

Chiyome's hat twitched up and down as she made her report, suggesting that her cat ears were moving about excitedly underneath.

Seeing Chiyome's reaction, a smile graced Ariane's lips.

"Oh, good. Just let me know any time you need to transport more settlers, because Arc here will help you in any way possible."

Ariane may have been joking, but I was more than happy to help Chiyome and the others out in any way I could.

Ariane's expression suddenly grew dark as she looked back at me. When I asked what was wrong, her ears went red and she averted her gaze before urging me to head to the guild and walking on ahead. It was all Chiyome and I could do to shrug in confusion and follow after her.

There were few people at the mercenary guild when we arrived, seeing as it was the middle of the day. As we stood there in the near-empty space, the staff member who'd assisted us last time quickly spotted me and called out to us.

"Sounds like you were pretty busy yesterday."

The man mentioned that he heard everything from the leader of the Silver Blades before grabbing a leather bag next to him and hefting it up. I could hear metal clanking clearly as it moved.

"This is your payment for the escort mission yesterday. It would probably have been a bit more if the requestor was a company, but the central government hasn't updated their rates."

He laughed and urged me to check the contents of the bag. While I was counting the coins, the man excitedly continued on.

"I have to say, you've gotta be a pretty skilled swordsman to chop off a minotaur's arm in one go."

He imitated swinging a sword before looking back at me with a look of disbelief.

Personally speaking, I knew that it was less my skill with the blade and rather the abilities of the blade itself, so the praise made me feel rather uncomfortable. I glanced over at Ariane and Chiyome and nervously scratched

my head.

“I appreciate your kind words, but my swordsmanship is little more than child’s play compared to these two.”

I finally finished counting up the coins. It all checked out.

“Well, I guess there’s a lot out there that I still don’t know, but if a brave knight like you says so, I’ll just have to believe it. All the same, I’m excited to see where you go from here.”

He looked closely at Ariane and Chiyome, though Ariane merely pulled her hood down even lower and avoided his gaze. This didn’t seem to faze him, however. He picked up another item sitting next to him with a flourish, pretending something had just occurred to him.

“Oh, right, I have some more good news for your brave warriors. Following Brad’s recommendation yesterday, the guild decided it would do us no good to hold such talent back at a low rank. We have promoted the Turbulent Ponta Patrol to First Rank Bronze.”

He showed me a bronze tag—our guild license. The tag was the same color as the one we were currently wearing, but this one was etched with a single sword rather than three spears.

“We must have been highly regarded to jump straight to First Rank.”

“Kyii!”

The surprise was evident in my voice as I picked up the newly issued guild tag.

Ponta also looked it over with great interest from its perch atop my head. Its excitement was audible as it sniffed noisily.

Yesterday, Brad told us that he would speak to the guild, but I was unsure if he’d follow through. Apparently, he was a man of his word.

The leader of a First Rank Gold mercenary group probably had a lot of sway. It was quite the pleasant surprise to be promoted to First Rank Bronze in less than a week. This brought us one step closer to Silver Rank, which would give us permission to move between cities within the empire.

According to the staff member, the guild had recognized our abilities. And if

we were just able to take on more requests and achieve more results for the guild, then Silver Rank wouldn't be too far off.

He handed over the First Rank Bronze tags to Ariane and Chiyome as well, and we all returned the Third Rank Bronze versions we were wearing.

Ariane glanced down at the new guild tag swaying just below her neckline. "It's going even better than we planned, huh?"

Chiyome turned her attention to the job board in the corner of the room. "We should probably take as many jobs within the city as we can, so we can further our investigation at the same time."

I nodded in agreement with her assessment and made my way toward the job board. As usual, there were a large assortment of arbitrary requests, plus those which remained neglected due to the time when they took place. I picked out several requests which started in the afternoon and seemed likely to end in the evening, and then discussed them with Ariane and Chiyome before deciding on the next request we'd take.

We settled on a request to clean an irrigation canal in the afternoon—something which had nothing at all to do with mercenary work.

Once the job was complete, we returned back to Lalatoya, where Ariane and Chiyome immediately took off to the baths with Ponta in tow. Cleaning out irrigation ditches was far more dreadful than I'd ever imagined. We wouldn't have finished it today, if not for Chiyome's water-based techniques.

Judging by the amount of work it involved, the job was intended for a large mercenary group. However, it had been left untouched since the pay was so low. Fortunately for us, just like with the chemist escort job, the requestor was a public entity, and our efforts would likely be seen as a decent contribution... though to be honest, we probably wouldn't have taken the job if not for that.

Now that we'd finished, I was newly impressed by just how clean the elven village was. I'd had Chiyome give me a full wash with her water magic upon returning, but the stench still clung to me. Once Ariane was out of the bath, I decided I'd take my armor in with me to let it soak, too.

Ariane would likely balk at the idea of doing a similar job again. I'd need to look for something different next time.

I looked up at the starry sky above the village and sighed.

The next day, we went straight to work chasing down jobs at the mercenary guild. There weren't a whole lot of choices for groups with only a few members, making our task hard, but there *was* a surprising amount of available work that involved such things as wall repair and providing security for merchants. Since repairing walls consisted largely of physical labor, such as transporting dirt and cut stones back and forth, I asked Ariane and Chiyome to collect information around Rontestatt while I took care of the labor by myself.

The on-site manager scowled when he learned only one person from the mercenary guild had bothered to show up—and decked out in armor no less—and let me know his displeasure. To be fair, it *was* pretty odd for someone to wear such burdensome armor while carrying around heavy objects. At first glance, I must have looked like I either misunderstood what the job was all about or had no real desire to work in the first place.

Once I easily hefted a massive rock with one hand, however, the manager and other laborers were quick to welcome me to the group.

This world lacked any sort of heavy machinery for use in civil engineering or construction, and thus the majority of the work had to be done by man or beast. In that sense, my excessive strength made me something of an equivalent to portable machinery. In terms of power alone, large animals could be expected to provide that kind of labor, but the fact that I understood verbal instructions made me even more valuable. Or perhaps I was just being put to use at their convenience?

Apparently, the local nobility had put out orders to repair and expand the walls, which had led to a labor shortage. The situation seemed like a recent development. Around the same time, the number of mercenaries also began to increase as restrictions were imposed on entering and exiting the city. Rumor had it that tensions with the neighboring kingdom were rising.

Considering my status as a mercenary, people had questions for me about these recent circumstances. However, I knew nothing about any of it, since I'd

only gotten here using a teleportation stone. I deflected most of the questions by keeping up my story of coming here as a bodyguard on business.

Though there was certainly enough circumstantial evidence to support the rumors of strife with the neighboring kingdom, it seemed none of the commoners had any real information. However, since the staff at the mercenary guild had let it slip that things were tense with our neighbors, it seemed all but certain that the nobles were making moves to prepare for a tense situation.

In situations like this, the ruling class were always on the lookout for spies—and smugglers were the ones most suspected of being spies. As Chiyome rightfully pointed out, holding credentials from a mercenary guild would prove vital to our being able to move about freely within the empire.

The fact that the second most popular job was providing security for merchants said a lot about the situation within the city. Due to the nature of the work they performed, many mercenaries were a rough-and-tumble lot. It was no surprise that more fights were beginning to break out as the city filled with these characters. Dealing with such people was a challenge for ordinary merchants, so they chose to ask the mercenary guild to let other mercenaries handle them.

It almost looked like a scheme to build your own market—what with mercenaries causing disputes and then having other mercenaries come along to solve those disputes. I figured such schemes were probably far from rare.

It was jobs like these that helped the Turbulent Ponta Patrol gain even greater recognition, however. Leaving a beautiful woman or a young girl as security outside a storefront never failed to attract the types of mercenaries who were out to cause trouble. When they refused to entertain the idea of dealing with these men, the rowdy brutes would only get more enraged, and find themselves swiftly beaten by these skilled female mercenaries, thus improving our reputation.

Conversely, I also found myself highly valued by the local citizenry, thanks to the fact that most people looking to cause a fight tended to avoid an armored hulk with an animal on his head.

Not only did we gain a certain degree of recognition despite being newcomers to the mercenary scene, but we were even gaining praise from our peers for dealing with the trouble-makers among the mercenaries. Due to the nature of our mission to secretly search for the beautiful Cardinal, it seemed like getting our name out there would help—but considering how things were going in the city, it seemed better to act above board and avoid reacting to undue suspicion by gathering information under the table.

In any case, just standing around and acting as security exposed us to rumors and overheard conversations, saving me from having to openly collect any information on my own. One such conversation that stuck in my mind had to do with bandits operating behind the scenes. Apparently, Rontestatt and its surroundings were suffering an outbreak of such banditry.

“The attacks are occurring out in the surrounding rural areas rather than the highways. Food prices are already on the rise with the city on lockdown, but if the rural areas get done in too, the costs will only continue to rise.”

I heard about this from an older woman married to a man working for a merchant. She seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than most people, perhaps because her husband worked in logistics.

“I’d like you to do something about these thieves, at the very least. Would a strong boy like you be willing to take on such a job?”

I cocked my head to the side at her request.

“Hmm, I don’t recall seeing any jobs about subduing bandits on the guild’s job board.”

Ponta imitated my shrugging motion. “Kyiiii?”

“Jobs involving subduing bandits not only include pay from the local nobility, but from the affected villages and merchants as well. These kinds of jobs are usually sent to the larger mercenary groups of at least silver rank or higher.”

Just then, a member of the Silver Blades butted in, putting an end to the small talk between me and the woman. He and I had become acquainted with one another while I was working as security and we would talk from time to time when I was on duty. As a member of a Gold-Rank mercenary group, his

information was almost certainly spot-on.

There was a bit of a strange tone to his voice as he explained the situation to the older woman. “The most important thing about subduing bandits is to find their base camps, and that requires manpower. Even if he’s got the strength to take them down, you won’t be able to stop them if you can’t find their key members.”

“Wouldn’t an impressive request like that go straight to your Silver Blades, then? What are you doing out here, talking shop?”

“Kyii!”

Ponta seemed to be of the same mind as it eyed the mercenary. The older woman was next to join the conversation and voiced her agreement.

The man raised his arms and shook his head as if in defeat.

“Our specialty is more slaying monsters. Now, why are we talking about other mercenary groups and taking care of bandits? I’m finally on break, so I’m going to do some shopping, thank you very much.”

His plea of surrender brought a smile to the woman’s cheeks. It may not have been the happiest of topics, but it was nice to be at peace for once.

I let my mind wander as I continued listening to my surroundings.

Obviously, if you wanted to take down some bandits and you didn’t already know where they’d made their base, you had to start by acquiring information about them. And then, you’d need a sufficiently large force to throw at them. However, I knew two people who were quite good at locating their enemies. As long as we could narrow down the bandits’ general location, they would have no problem finding them in a subsequent search.

I looked at Ariane, who stood at my side. She turned to meet my gaze, then leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Hey, Arc. We’re here to find the cardinals, not subdue bandits.”

Apparently, she already knew I was thinking about the bandits. She let out an exasperated sigh, almost as if she could read my mind. It felt like our objective had changed the moment I began talking to the older woman. Her ability to get

inside someone's head was truly something to fear.

While I did feel bad about losing focus, I couldn't shake the feeling that mopping up this unresolved problem would contribute greatly to the guild. However, requests to subdue the bandits were currently only sent to large mercenary groups. Without the ability to freely leave the city of our own accord, we were left trying to further our contributions to the guild through the jobs we had access to. After all, if we were able to leave the city as we pleased, then we wouldn't need to bother with the bandits in the first place.

I spent the rest of the day mulling that over.

The next day, I visited the mercenary guild as usual and looked over at the requests on the job board. One pinned to the corner caught my eye. The pay was low, but that didn't matter, since we weren't in it for the money. What mattered were the details.

It was another security job, but for a village outside the city. I asked the guild staff about it and was told it was a request to protect the village from all the bandits on the loose. The big difference here was that the job was to improve the village's defenses, not subdue the bandits.

As the man had mentioned yesterday, you needed to hire quite a few mercenaries to search out and subdue bandits. But, depending on the number of attackers, you could get away with far fewer defenders to repel an attack. Villages in this world were usually surrounded by high walls and deep moats to deter monsters, leaving only one or two entrances as choke points that needed defending. In such a situation, even a few people would suffice.

The nobles seemed to be fixated on eradicating the bandits, but that would do the village no good if they were destroyed by the time that happened. They couldn't afford to hire a large group of mercenaries, so they must have decided to arrange for what little they could pull together. Judging by the amount of compensation on offer, they were aiming for about two to three people.

With a job like this, we could legally leave the city—and, if we were lucky, subdue the bandits in the meantime to score a promotion to Silver Rank.

I immediately proposed it to Ariane and Chiyome.

“What do you think of this job? We could leave two people guarding the village and send one to go hunt for the bandits. If we get lucky, we could solve all of our problems in one go.”

Ariane showed some reluctance. “If we’re lucky, right? You know, our identities could very well be exposed if we spend ten days guarding a small village. Unlike out here in the city, we can’t exactly use teleportation magic as we please.”

She was right. It was imperative that Ariane, a dark elf, and Chiyome, a cat-girl, both keep their identities under wraps here in the empire. Not that I was much better, seeing as there was nothing but a skeleton beneath my armor.

In contrast to Ariane’s reluctance, Chiyome seemed open to the idea.

“If they put the job up, it’s extremely likely there are bandits in the area. If we can learn more about the nature of their attacks, the number of bandits and the equipment they have, as well as whether or not they’re using horses, we can probably narrow down our search.”

However, she continued on to express her concerns.

“Considering what we’ve been hearing around town about the number and scale of the attacks, it seems there could be multiple groups of bandits on the loose. Catching one might not actually solve the city’s problem.”

As a ninja who specialized in information gathering, it was no surprise that Chiyome had accurately analyzed the situation.

“We’re not here to solve the bandit issue, anyway. Our primary purpose is to search for the cardinals. In order to do that, we need to be promoted to Silver Rank to be able to freely leave the city...which means this request could be a good way to show our contribution to the guild.”

The quickest way to shorten our stay in the village was to eliminate the problem at the source: the bandits. If Ariane and Chiyome could search the surrounding area, it would go even quicker. Sure, some of the villagers might become worried if they saw only me left behind to guard the village, but I might be able to win them over by showing off my strength.

If the search ended up taking a while, I could remain in the village and teleport Ariane and Chiyome to and from there while they were out searching the surrounding area. I explained my idea to them, and we ultimately decided to accept the job after a unanimous vote—though the look of disdain never left Ariane’s face.

Upon taking the request, we were handed a permit to leave the city. We were told that if a patrolling soldier caught us outside the city, we would have to show that permit, along with our job documents. If we lost either of these, we would be arrested under suspicion of smuggling.

So there really were soldiers out on patrol throughout the empire. Did that mean that we couldn’t use the imperial roads without identification?

The village requesting our services was apparently a day away by carriage. The staff asked if we would need them to make arrangements, but I turned them down. A one-day trip by carriage should only take about two hours using short-distance teleportation. However, considering that the highway was being patrolled by soldiers, I had to be careful about how I used my teleportation magic. Which meant we should arrive around... noon or so.

“Shall we get going?”

“Kyii!”

Ponta’s eyes glimmered. It wagged its tail excitedly atop my head at the initial marching orders.

Ariane sighed slightly while Chiyome nodded her agreement.

Upon presenting the job request and permit at the town gate, we were allowed to leave the city with surprising ease. As someone always prepared to be asked too many questions about my identity, I was relieved. This was much preferable to being hassled.

The guild staff gave us a rough map of the route to the village, but I had a hard time figuring it out. We spotted a group of patrolling soldiers, and I approached them before they could get too suspicious of us, handing them both the job request and map while asking where to go.

In retrospect, it might have been an even better idea than I’d thought. It’s

easy to be suspicious of someone from a distance, but people were often willing to help if you dared approach them first to talk. It was also nice to see someone sympathize with me as they looked over the guild's hand-drawn map.

We managed to solve the mystery of the map and arrived at the village around noon, as planned.

The atmosphere of the village was not so different from the ones we'd visited in the Rhoden Kingdom, though the fields surrounding it looked a little rough. The fact that there are no villagers taking care of the fields was probably due to their fear of bandits.

In front of the gate, the only entrance into the village, I saw a young man sitting with his back to the gatepost, holding a spear and yawning. He seemed to be lacking some of the concern of a village that was so fearful of bandit attacks that they would hire mercenaries for security. His hair was unkempt and he looked a bit homely, something which probably wasn't uncommon in the village, but I couldn't shake the sense of unease I got from him.

Ponta slipped down from the top of my helmet and onto my shoulders and began letting out a low, guttural growl from deep in its throat. Confused by Ponta's sudden change, I glanced over toward Chiyome, though she only replied in a low whisper, encouraging me to act like nothing was out of place.

"Arc, there's something strange about the village, but they've already figured out we're here. For the time being, let's pretend everything is normal."

Between her comments and the way Ponta was acting, I glanced around, wondering if there were already bandits around us.

Ariane nudged my side with her elbow to encourage me to be on guard. "Don't act so suspicious, Arc. That man up there is probably not a villager."

As soon as Ariane pointed this out, I inadvertently turned my gaze forward and noticed the man in front of the gate standing up and leaning on his spear cane as he took us in. Ariane fell back a step behind me and pulled her cloak down low over her face as she eyed our surroundings.

I finally arrived at the gate, still wondering what she meant about the man not being a villager.

“You a mercenary? What’s your business with a village like this?”

The man held a roughly made spear under his arm, as if he’d finally just figured out what was going on. It was far from surprising that he’d have a hard time telling if the armored knight escorting a young girl was a mercenary. If anything, it was the proper question.

It *was* unnatural for a village who had requested the services of a mercenary to ask such a question. Since the small village had hired outside mercenaries after being victimized by the bandits, it was unlikely that the villagers wouldn’t be expecting us. If so, it was unclear why he was wondering if we were mercenaries. Even if not all the villagers knew of the plan to hire mercenaries, it would be strange not to mention the possibility of our arrival to the person guarding the single entrance to the village.

If the man in front of us was not a villager, however, the answer was self-evident.

Ariane and Chiyome seemed to already be aware of the situation, so I decided to just pretend that things were normal and cleared my throat.

“Well, we received a request from the village at the Rontestatt mercenary guild.”

“Oh, oh, right. I remember hearing something about that.” The gatekeeper was slightly awkward in his response. “The village mayor will have more information for you. You go ahead and wait inside and I’ll call him for you.”

He gestured with his chin to the man waiting on the other side of the gate. The other man responded by quickly taking off further into the village while the gatekeeper stepped aside and smiled, welcoming us inside.

However, the moment his gaze fell on Ariane standing behind me, the corners of his lips curved upward. She ignored the guard’s gaze and looked into the village to size it up.

As I proceeded into the village after the gatekeeper, I heard a loud *thunk* behind me. Looking back, I noticed the gate into the village had been closed.

The village looked a little rough around the edges, but at first glance, it didn’t appear seriously damaged.

“There are a lot of people watching us from their houses.”

I spied Chiyome’s ears flittering about nervously under her hat as she kept an eye on our surroundings while trailing behind the guard. Nothing felt particularly out of the ordinary to me. It seemed like a normal, quiet village.

However, as we passed the square located at the center of the village, the mood changed completely. Black soot was piled up in the plaza, from which rose an unpleasant odor. Few of the burnt items managed to retain any noticeable shape, though some of them were, without a doubt, humans. As for what kind of humans, I couldn’t say.

One man stood at the front of the scene, an uneasy smile on his face.

Something about all the knife wounds on his face gave the distinct impression that he wasn’t a villager. He looked down at the large sword in his hand for a moment before turning to me and licking his lips.

“I’m the mayor of this here village. Thank you for coming all the way here. I guess the people of my village asked the mercenary guild for help, huh? Sorry, my memory’s been getting bad lately. Can you remind me what it is that we asked you to do?”

Before we could reply, the scarred man belted out a fierce scream. In the blink of an eye, a lot of rough-looking guys armed to the teeth came out from the scattered houses, roaring intimidatingly like the man in front of us. There were quite a few of them—close to thirty.

It was probably unnecessary to ask who was now in charge of the village. I crossed my arms, set my feet in a defiant stance, and glared at the man in front of me.

“We were called to provide security to the village after it’d been attacked by bandits.”

The men around us broke out in laughter.

“Bandits? Oh, no, they’re so scary!! We won’t get a wink of sleep if you don’t catch them for us!”

Their laughter grew even more raucous.

“It looks like we’re a bit too late. What happened to the villagers?”

I did everything in my power to keep my voice cool and level. Becoming emotional certainly wouldn’t improve the situation. In response, the scarred man—probably the head of the group—thrust his sword toward me and sneered.

“We’re the inhabitants of this village now.”

I rested my hand on the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg before Chiyome stepped forward to my side to stop me.

“Arc, try to not kill them all, okay? I know it’s a big ask, but these people will have information about their cohorts. If you give them up to the guild, they may have to fess up about the other bandits.”

I hesitated for a moment when I heard her proposal before nodding and letting go of the sword hilt. Chiyome, Ariane, and I could make short work of all these men if we chose to. But if we killed everyone, there would be no one to attest to them being bandits. If we weren’t careful, then we could be accused of having wiped out the entire village.

We didn’t need to keep everyone alive, but we at least needed to spare the man who appeared to be leading the group. As Chiyome said, capturing the bandits alive could prove to be the greater contribution to the guild.

I clenched my fists, inhaled and held my breath for a moment before slowly exhaling and fixing my gaze on the leader.

“We need to capture as many of these bandits as we can.”

With that, Ariane and Chiyome also left their weapons undrawn and raised their fists. The sight only seemed to inspire the man up ahead.

“Kill him and take his armor! We’ll get some nice coin from it! Be sure to capture the girls alive... I want the first go at them!”

The surrounding bandits raised their weapons high and let forth a mighty roar. They seemed to think they had no chance of losing to us. They looked like salivating beasts as they eyed Ariane.

However, before the men even had a chance to close in on me, I was already

moving. My raw strength extended not just to my arms, but my legs, and Glenys, Ariane's teacher and mother, had taught me how to move like this. By dropping my lower body, angling my torso in the direction I wished to move and kicking hard off the ground, I closed the gap with my opponents at lightning speed.

However, I was still nowhere near as good as her. Though the attack was straightforward and relied on brute force, to an amateur observer, it looked almost like the user had completely disappeared.

Rather than throwing a real punch from this state, I merely let my fist be positioned between us as I stopped.

The head bandit's eyes went wide in surprise before his expression instantly turned to one of shock as my fist sank into his chest. His body squirmed as he flew through the air and crashed into the clay wall of a nearby house, leaving a massive indentation.

In that instant, all the other bandits closing in on us stopped in their tracks.

"That was me playing nice, so you might as well give in now."

I'd punched the man using only the speed and weight of my body, which was still more than enough to shatter several ribs. Any normal person would be out of the fight. In fact, the bandit leader lay prone on the ground, hacking in pain as he struggled to breathe, spit dripping from his mouth.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd let out a piercing scream, breaking the rest of the bandits out of their temporary panic.

"Kill him!!"

I didn't know who said it, but the rest of the bandits screamed as well and swung their weapons as they rushed in unison toward me.

I really wanted to avoid being surrounded. Kicking off from the ground again, I flew into the oncoming bandits and hit one in the back. The man bounced off the ground like a skipping stone and slammed against the wall that surrounded the village.

Judging by the fact that he was no longer moving, I'd hit him a bit too hard.

But there was no time for me to worry about that. After all, I didn't need to bring them *all* back alive.

Ariane dove straight into the swarm of men, ramming her knee right into one of the bandits' chins. Using the man as a stepping stone, she jumped over the head of another approaching bandit and kicked him square in the back, knocking him and several others over in the process.

The group of men hesitated for a moment, likely still trying to capture her alive. This only served to make them good targets for Ariane.

Dark elven women were generally stronger than the average human man, and every time she landed a blow on one of her opponents, I could hear the sound of their bones cracking like dry wood. Her movements were graceful and sophisticated, learned over many years of training with Glenys, and nothing like the full-frontal way I advanced.

She took a breath and then disappeared again. I lost sight of her for one moment—and in the next, four more bandits dropped to the ground. In these two moments, the men came to realize that she was not prey, but the hunter. But by the time they noticed it, it was already too late. If they turned to flee now, they would only be exposing their backs to the beast.

Chiyome had no problem keeping up, however. Taking advantage of her petite body, she danced between the bandits, causing those who dared to try to catch her to swing their weapons at their own brethren.

She moved so masterfully that it made you wonder if she had eyes on her back. What's more, she struck only with jabs and kicks directed toward pressure points. The bandits had the breath knocked out of them with each blow. She would then double down and strike at their joints, sending the men to the ground.



She was terrifyingly efficient in how she laid waste to the human bodies, almost like a child playing with toy dolls. The fact that anyone was still alive spoke to her skill.

The group of bandits who'd been closing in like a pack of hungry wolves moments ago were now running like scared sheep. There would be no escape, since the bandits themselves had blocked the village's only escape route.

The sounds of the screaming bandits filled the village. All that could be heard were cries of anguish.

In a moment, all thirty bandits were on the ground.

"Huh, well that was disappointing." Ariane popped her shoulders and rotated her arms around.

Chiyome hadn't really exerted herself in the fight, but she stretched her arms all the same.

All credit went to Glenys and her training for being able to make such progress in reducing how much force I used. I still tended to get caught up in a fight and use more strength than I needed to, but this was an improvement, all the same.

While all the bandits we could see had been dealt with, it was possible there were more still lurking in the village. As I walked around the village, I grabbed the unconscious hoodlums by the feet and chunked them into the village square.

I glanced around and called out to Ariane and Chiyome.

"Is that all of them?"

Ponta, who was still wrapped around my neck, stuck its nose up in the air and moved its head back and forth, as if looking around the camp, before crying out in a certain direction.

"Kyii."

Chiyome moved in the direction Ponta indicated to search.

"I can still sense people in the village."

Ariane and I turned our attention to the surrounding houses. I opened the door to the house nearest me and stepped inside, but was only met with a silent, dusty interior with no signs of life.

Just then, Ponta tapped my helmet as if to tell me I was in the wrong place.

Following Ponta's instructions, I stepped back outside and observed Ariane and Chiyome silently signaling each other whether they approached a large-sized building. I hurried to close the gap with them and, as soon as Ariane noticed my approach, she shot me a glance to invite me to go in first.

Considering I was fully armored, it would be safest for me to enter first, in case I was suddenly struck. I nodded my acknowledgment and stepped in front of the door while Chiyome and Ariane flanked either side of me.

After confirming they were in place, I threw the door open and jumped inside. The moment I passed through the threshold and out of the natural light, I was temporarily consumed by darkness.

I heard several screams coming from the back of the building. Perhaps I was a little too rough with that door. The room was quite large and there were several people within, suggesting this might have once been the home of the previous mayor.

The air was musty and smelled slightly of smoke. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I finally took in the sight before me: there were half-naked women and children settled in the corner of the room, watching us with frightened eyes. There looked to be about a dozen or so people.

I could see signs of abuse on their faces and arms and heard their sobs. However, others seemed dumbstruck by the sight of a man in massive armor standing in the open doorway.

The tension in the room eased slightly when Ariane and Chiyome stepped in from behind me. The two squinted at the darkness, but quickly seemed to adjust.

Ariane walked around me and gently pushed me back out of the room.

"Listen, we'll take care of this. You can tie the bandits up with rope or whatever else you can find so they don't escape. I'll call you for some healing

later.”

Glancing once more around the room, I bowed my head in apology over my lack of consideration.

After stepping back outside, I returned to the square where the bandits were. There, I found the supposed head of the group picking up his sword, his face contorted in agony.

As soon our eyes met, he struggled to bring his sword to the ready. However, no sooner had he moved than I hurled my shield like a discus in his direction and then dove after it in hot pursuit. He attempted to deflect the shield with his sword, but the impact was too strong, and knocked his sword away instead.

I grabbed the man’s chest and head butted him with my sturdy helmet, the force of the blow sending blood flying from his nose.

“Kyiiiiin...”

I hadn’t anticipated that my headbutt would send Ponta flying off my helmet. It spread its limbs and caught enough wind under the thin membrane that connected them to fly back up to my head again.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

Though it was pretty upset at me, I was glad little Ponta was okay. The scene replayed in my head, and I vowed to not lose myself in a fit of anger again.

“Well, we should do something about these bandits before they get any ideas.”

“Kyii!”

Ponta mewed in reply and took off from my head again. I figured it may have found something, but first, I needed rope or something of the like nearby that I could use.

After a short search, I found some ropes in a village barn. I used them to tie up the leader first, since I needed to be especially careful with him. He screamed and shouted as I tightened the ropes, possibly because of his injuries.

Suddenly, I spotted a strange pattern on the nape of his neck and stopped.

Was this from a branding iron or something? It looked almost like the emblem you'd find on a car, but not nearly as simple. Was it a marker of the bandit group they belonged to?

With that in mind, I took a peek at the necks of the other bandits lying around. They all had the same pattern etched in a similar place. Judging by the placement of the brand, it wasn't self-inflicted.

As I mulled over the meaning of the pattern, I finished tying up the leader and finally stood up, just in time to spot Ponta running over with a bundle of ropes in its mouth. It dropped the bundle of ropes in front of me and scratched at the ground with its front paws, as if to urge me to use them.

"Kyiiii, kyii."

I looked at the rope in my hand and the ropes Ponta had brought before turning my attention back to all the bandits still in the square. Would this be enough?

Shaking off my earlier suspicions, I quietly went to work tying up the bandits.

Chapter 3:

They Work from the Shadows

AFTER TYING the last bandit's hands, I stood up. The sky was already losing its daytime luster and giving way to the encroaching darkness of night.

Just as I'd decided my work was complete, Ariane came to call for my assistance.

"Are you finished here?"

"Um, somewhat."

There weren't enough ropes for all of the bandits lying on the ground around me. But I'd managed to tie them all together to prevent them from moving, so I *had* achieved my original goal.

"None of the villagers are fatally wounded, but I'd still like you to tend to their injuries with your healing magic."

I assented, and she quickly followed up with another question, her shoulders slumping and the words coming out with a heavy sigh.

"By the way, I heard some men screaming a little while back. What did you do? You were scaring the villagers, you know."

"No, no, it was nothing violent. However, I had to tie them up pretty tightly so they wouldn't escape, and they started crying out from the pain, so I had to shut a few of them up."

It had been particularly difficult to tie up a bandit who'd had his joints broken by Chiyome. One of his arms was hanging loose, so I'd had to struggle to tighten his bonds until the limb turned purple. From an outside perspective, I supposed it could be viewed as torture.

When I explained that to Ariane, she looked stunned and shook her head.

"I can't believe the whole village became their base of operations."

I nodded.

“I guess the order was issued to subdue the bandits, but no one ever assumed a whole village would be hijacked. The bandit attacks won’t be stopping anytime soon at this rate.”

Putting aside the morality of the issue, it was certainly a good strategy. It was pretty difficult to establish a unique base of your own outside a village or town in this world. Forests could make good hideaways for bandits, but the same applied to the monsters that inhabited them. Bandits often preferred to use natural caves, since they were easy to defend, but such caves tended to be small. If the confines were too narrow, it limited the number of bandits who could use the base.

And if you *did* try to use a larger cave as a base, there was a high possibility powerful monsters already made it their home. If you were careless, you’d be dead before you even knew what happened to you.

Due to these circumstances, the majority of bandit groups were small. I’d heard from some mercenaries that large groups of bandits would set up bases in populous cities, with sub-bases out in the suburbs, which they operated out of. They could always try to establish a base in the forest, but all the tools, labor, and time involved in clearing and consolidating such a camp would leave them little time to actually engage in banditry. Meanwhile, those willing to spare no effort wouldn’t bother to become bandits in the first place.

In that respect, this takeover of an entire village was truly an act of banditry—essentially stealing a large number of things that were already prepared and ready for their use.

Even with people hot on their trail, it would be hard to track the bandits down when they were hidden in a village like this. Besides, most of the mercenaries dispatched to subdue the bandits were apparently operating in squads of ten or so men. If they stopped by the village and got too suspicious, the whole squad would likely be killed outright, leaving no witnesses behind.

That said, it would be difficult to keep the village running with half of its inhabitants—the men—dead. In terms of distance, this was one of Rontestatt’s satellite villages, meaning it was responsible for supplying the bigger cities with food. With all the laborers dead, food deliveries to the cities would stop,

making it only be a matter of time until someone got suspicious.

Perhaps they hadn't intended to make the village entirely their own, but only meant this as a temporary seizure? If so, the bandits might have been doomed from the start.

Upon arriving at the house, Ariane ushered me inside.

"Pardon me."

All eyes were on me the moment I stepped through the entrance, but I did my best to keep the mood as light as possible.

Some people tried to hide behind their companions, fearing that I might be one of the bandits. Even so, I found the atmosphere quite different from earlier, probably because Ariane and Chiyome were here with me. Perhaps the presence of Ponta swaying its fluffy tail over my head also helped alleviate the heavy mood.

"Arc, over here."

Urged on by Chiyome's words, I found a seated woman with her eyes fixed on the ground. She looked to be in her mid-20s, and had heavy swelling on the right side of her face, perhaps from a beating. She also had a large bruise on her shoulder and multiple cuts along her legs that oozed blood.

The injured woman trembled with fear as my massive form drew close.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Please stay still."

I gently reached for the right side of her face. She tensed up for a moment, but managed to find the strength to keep herself from pulling away.

"Heal!"

A soft light poured out from my outstretched hand and wrapped around the woman's swollen cheek. This was one of the low-level spells learned from the Monk class line, though it should be more than enough for an injury like this.

The moment the light touched her swollen cheek, the swelling reduced and her face returned to normal. Moving my hand, I let the healing light shine on the bruise on her shoulder and then down to her legs, healing those wounds as well.

The people around us stared in awe as they watched the situation unfold. The adults looked at us as if they were witnessing something incredible, while the children called out with admiration, perhaps simply fascinated by the sight of something they had never seen before.

Another woman who was watching the healing intently spoke up. “Are you a priest?”

There was probably no shortage of Hilk priests who used healing magic up here in the empire. For some reason, it seemed most of the people who used healing magic in this world held ecclesiastical positions. I supposed your services would always be in demand if you could use rare healing magic, so fanatics who chose to risk their lives by becoming soldiers or mercenaries had to be pretty rare.

I shook my head and chuckled. “I’m a traveling mercenary. I can only use a few healing techniques.”

The woman whose wound I just healed choked back sobs and bowed her head down low. Were these tears of relief at her life being saved, or regret over the ones she lost?

I couldn’t think of any suitable words to say to her. It seemed that Ariane and Chiyome felt the same. They had reasons to resent humans, but they also understood that the pain of losing a loved one had nothing to do with race. Both of them quietly averted their eyes as they listened to the woman’s sobs.

I cleared my throat and looked around the room in the hopes of easing the tension in the room.

“Well, is there anyone else who needs help?”

“Kyii.”

After exchanging glances with one another, other people started coming over to me.

The treatment went smoothly after that, thanks in part to Ponta making me look a little less intimidating.

No one was seriously injured enough to need me to use Over Heal, but

unfortunately, the damage done to their hearts could not be healed with magic. All I could do was treat the damage done to their bodies.

The villagers seemed to be at a loss as for what to do once I'd healed the rest of them. Some still watched my every movement with frightened faces. Whenever our eyes met, they instantly tensed up and looked away. Fortunately, they didn't seem worried that we would inflict the same violence upon them that the bandits had.

Things had settled down, so I pushed those thoughts out of my head for the time being. I gently stroked the heads of the children who crowded around me and murmured to myself, "Well, then, what's next?"

We'd come here at the village mayor's behest to repel any attacking bandits. However, we ended up destroying the bandits, sending our whole plan out the window.

Ariane looked at the hoodlums in the village square and sighed. "First of all, we need to deal with those bandits outside."

The remaining villagers made no attempt to leave the building, as they were probably still terrified of the bandits. I wouldn't want to get next to a mass murderer either, even if they were tied up with rope.

Since they were criminals, they needed to be transferred to Rontestatt. Which meant we needed a way to transport around thirty people. I could use my long-distance teleportation magic, Transport Gate, to teleport us all in an instant, but it would be madness to use teleportation magic so openly out here in the empire. Another option might be to knock each person out and then teleport them, but when the bandits were later interrogated about what happened to them prior to being imprisoned, that might give rise to some discrepancies in their stories.

Failing that, I'd have to go back to Rontestatt first, to tell the mercenary guild what had happened and secure a means of transporting the bandits there. But I felt like that would be even more conspicuous. After all, the village was a day's journey from Rontestatt by horse-drawn carriage. If I returned less than half a day after I left, saying the village was destroyed by bandits, it would be hard to explain the timing without mentioning teleportation magic.

If I wanted to fill in any discrepancies in the timeline, I would need to explain the case to the city's mercenary guild tomorrow at the earliest. With that in mind, even if I could secure the means of transportation quickly, it would take at least two days to return to the village and remove the bandits.

The most realistic option was for me to go back to the city, explain what happened to the mercenary guild, and secure a means for transporting the bandits.

In the meantime, I'd leave Ariane and Chiyome here in the village. Even with the bandits detained, it would be a bad idea to leave the women and children alone in the village to watch over them while we returned to the city. Faced with returning to the city and going to prison, the bandits would almost certainly attempt to escape at all costs. If things went poorly, we might return to find every villager murdered by the time we returned.

Two of us would need to remain in the village as a deterrent to keep an eye on them. And it was better for the women in the village if those two were women as well, rather than me.

Both Ariane and Chiyome nodded in agreement with my proposal.

If I wasn't going to use teleportation magic in public, I needed to leave the village by the end of the day. I put my hand to my chin in order to organize my thoughts. I would first leave the village and then use my teleportation magic to teleport to Lalatoya before heading to the Rontestatt mercenary guild the next day. In that case, neither of the parties would find the high speed of my movement unnatural.

I'd been getting a bit too used to the convenience of traveling using teleportation magic. This was annoying. Unfortunately, we had to act with discretion here in the empire.

As I thought this over, I suddenly became aware of the weight of Ponta sitting on my head.

"How about you stay here with Ariane and Chiyome?"

"Kyii?"

I could feel Ponta quirk its head to the side at this. Pulling Ponta down from

atop my head, I held its gaze as I spoke.

“You’re good at sensing people’s presence. Can you do me a favor and keep an ear out for any of their comrades trying to sneak into the village or others trying to escape?”

Chiyome was more than good enough for the task, but it couldn’t hurt to have two people on the job. Despite its cute appearance, Ponta had an even stronger supernatural sense for these things. Or perhaps spirit animals were just more sensitive to the darkness in people’s hearts? There was no doubt in my mind that Ponta would help bring peace to the villagers’ weary souls.

Ponta lifted its paw as if to assure me it was on the case.

“Kyii! Kyiii!!”

I handed Ponta to Ariane and stroked the hair on its chin with my fingertips. Ponta’s ticklish response brought a smile to my lips as I turned back to Ariane.

“Sorry to ask this of you, but I’d like to leave the villagers in your hands.”

“Come back as soon as you can. I don’t know how the people up here in the Hilk area will react if our cover is blown.”

I nodded at the seriousness of her point.

The Hilk church advocated for the supremacy of the human race. If their identities were revealed out here in imperial territory, where the Hilk faith was so widespread, there was no knowing how such a small, insular village might react. Even if we’d saved these people from the bandits, we still had to be careful.

“I’ll do my best to secure some sort of means of transportation as soon as possible.”

Before leaving, I explained what would happen to the bandits to the villagers. Their reactions were generally positive, though that might just have been because they were thankful we were getting rid of the bandits (as opposed to letting them stay in the village forever).

First off, it was probably best if I returned to Lalatoya and report back to Glenys. I felt bad leaving Ariane and Chiyome back in the village while I relaxed

back in Lalatoya, but I had no choice. Tomorrow, I would head to the Rontestatt mercenary guild in the morning, prepare for the bandit transfer, and return to the village.

In cases like this, it was best to strike while the iron was hot.

I activated my Transport Gate ability to return to Lalatoya, but just as the magic rune appeared beneath my feet, I suddenly let out a gasp and stopped the spell.

“Oh, no, I forgot to record a teleportation point for the village.”

Long-distance teleportation magic didn’t work well without a clear mental image of the destination, so I needed to draw the scene or a landmark for my reference. It was convenient, sure, but it also came with many restrictions.

I pulled my sketchbook of teleportation points from the bag slung around my waist and opened it to a blank page. *Hmm. Maybe I could use the scene of the forest right outside the village?*

After having made such an easy exit from the village, I knew it would be awkward and possibly invite some misunderstanding if someone saw me loitering outside its wall. I decided to draw as quickly as possible, setting to work copying the landscape outside the village onto the blank page.

Early the next morning, I left Lalatoya for Rontestatt using my Transport Gate.

I took a quick look around the vacant mansion to ensure nothing was out of the ordinary before making my way outside. The air outside was chilly and the whole city was covered with a white haze, providing poor visibility. The cold air seemed to be coming down from the towering mountains nearby, bathing the city in what reminded me of the famous London fog.

The moment I stepped through the mansion’s gate and out into the street, I immediately felt as if someone’s eyes were on me. I looked around, but couldn’t spot anyone through the fog. Ariane, Chiyome, or Ponta might have been able to sense whoever it was, but that was beyond me.

Figuring it was just my overactive imagination, I decided to leave the mansion

and think nothing of it.

Arriving at the mercenary guild, I found it bustling with activity due to the early morning hour. It seemed there were quite a few jobs up for grabs, considering all the people surrounding the job board and reception desk.

I cut a conspicuous figure even in the mercenary world and people now greeted me whenever I showed up at the guild. Perhaps all the work we'd done in the past week paid off? I was grateful that I'd managed to—if the rumors were to be believed—get in the good graces of the Gold-Rank Silver Blades while simultaneously avoiding getting involved with troublesome characters.

Noticing an empty space at the reception desk, I walked over to speak to the receptionist.

“Give me the job request form you plan to take,” he said, probably thinking I was applying for a job like all the others.

I simply shook my head.

“Sorry, I'd like to speak with you about a job I'm currently working, not a new one.” I handed him the security request issued by the village. “Actually, I went to the village that issued the request, but it'd already been occupied by bandits.”

The moment the words left my mouth, shouts of surprise rose up from the guild staff and other mercenaries around me. It made sense, considering the city itself was being impacted by bandits now, leading the nobles to hire mercenaries to subdue them. The subject of bandits was currently of great interest to everyone.

“The bandits occupied the village?! We need to form a team to subdue them at once!”

Seeing the guild staff launch to their feet, I instinctively rushed ahead with the rest of my story to try to control the situation.

“Wait, wait, all the bandits occupying the village have already been captured.”

The man looked surprised at this and sat back down. The other mercenaries standing around leaned in closer to listen in.

“Wait a minute—there should only have been three of you out there. How did you deal with a group of bandits big enough to occupy an entire village? How many bandits were there?”

Apparently, we were already known for being a small group of mercenaries. He’d known how many people we had before I even mentioned our name. It was only natural he’d find it hard to believe three mercenaries could handle a group of bandits large enough to take over a village. Since he’d asked for the number of bandits we’d captured, perhaps he was speculating that the bandits themselves may have had some issues.

“Some were fatally injured in combat, but there were about thirty in total.”

The guild erupted in shouts again.

Unlike last time, however, these weren’t cries of admiration. Rather, I was met with derisive laughter and suspicious gazes. People called the story outlandish, and some walked out of the guild, muttering that it was nothing but a lie, and a bad one at that. Although we’d built up a bit of a positive reputation, we were still a newly formed mercenary group with few achievements to our name, after all. Clearly, we weren’t quite *that* trustworthy yet.

As I watched their departing backs, I realized my mistake. I’d been so distracted by arranging for the quick transfer of all of the bandits that I’d forgotten how much attention it would attract to come here during the busy morning hours and tell such fantastic tales. For now, though, I needed to solve the problem at hand. I could reflect upon my mistake later.

One way or another, I had to convince them of my story to get the transfer of the bandits sorted.

“My comrades are currently watching the detainees back in the village. Can I request a transfer back to the city?”

The guild staff looked back at me, seemingly questioning the authenticity of my claims.

“Unfortunately, the guild doesn’t provide such services.”

Subduing bandits was generally a job assigned to larger mercenary groups.

Even if they did capture a large group of bandits, the mercenaries would have comparable numbers, and would thus handle the transportation themselves. Three mercenaries capturing such a large group of bandits was entirely unprecedented.

If the guild didn't normally handle transfers of this sort, it may have been a mistake for me to even ask in the first place. It really was starting to look like we'd have trouble boosting our rank unless we managed to get more people in our group. Like the army, mercenary groups were required to have a certain degree of self-sufficiency.

"Hmm, then I guess I'll have to ask the nobles about transferring the bandits."

If I couldn't rely on the mercenary guild, I'd have to ask the local lord, as they were in charge of both the authorities who enforced their laws and detaining those who committed crimes on their lands.

The guild staff member frowned at this.

"Unfortunately, there have been troubling developments at the border over the past few days. Many of the lord's soldiers have been assigned to deal with that situation, so I don't think you can expect much from them."

His response caused me to groan involuntarily. The other mercenaries might have been more interested in the movement at the border, as a fresh commotion arose, demanding more information about the topic.

"I guess in that case, I'll just bring back the leader and kill the rest?"

The staff member gulped and his eyes went wide at this.

A person suddenly addressed me from behind. They sounded interested in what I had to say.

"That's a pretty terrifying idea. Though I guess it is the most realistic way of handling all the bandits you've got, really."

Looking back at the familiar voice, I spied Brad, leader of the Silver Blades, standing there with a gentle smile on his face. Next to him was Meel, his chief, who followed him everywhere. Now that the best mercenary group in the city had joined the conversation, the other mercenaries in the guild began to pay

attention.

“If you can’t rely on the guild or soldiers, I suppose we can take care of transferring the bandits for you.”

The guild officials responded to Brad’s proposal before I even had a chance to. “Out of the question! There’s no need for Brad and his mercenaries to perform such transport duties! What’s more, this whole story about capturing the bandits is questionable as it is. There’s no sense in sending a Gold-Rank mercenary out there when we still don’t know anything.”

The man felt the pressure of my gaze on him and suddenly realized the weight of his words. But I waved off his concerns, knowing the guild didn’t entirely trust us yet.

Brad just laughed to himself and tapped me on the shoulder before turning back to the staff member. “You seem to suspect he’s lying. I appreciate your intolerance for falsehoods, as a guild employee, but at the same time, I know that Arc here is telling the truth. My beliefs are backed up by the fact that our chief recognizes the talent of their members.”

His tone was playful, but his words elicited gasps of surprise from the surrounding mercenaries.

It was unusual for such a highly praised group of Gold-Rank mercenaries, known for their multitude of achievements and skills, to publicly affirm the abilities of the newly established group. Those who had been eyeing me with suspicion and contempt mere moments ago were now looking at me with jealousy and envy. For better or for worse, we certainly stood out.

“Judging by the Turbulent Ponta Patrol’s skills, I doubt any number of bandits could have stood up to them. The same goes for us, too.”

It almost sounded like he was suggesting that the Turbulent Ponta Patrol was on the same level as the Silver Blades. Or possibly suggesting we were even better? Either way, he was saying this was something we were certainly capable of doing, and not just some tall tale.

With the guild staff taken aback, Brad turned back to me.

“Our group has some clout with the lord here. With all the problems the

bandits have been causing of late, this will certainly be of interest to him. Maybe we can let him handle all the tricky parts. What do you think?"

He was a lifesaver. At first glance, it might seem like he was trying to steal the credit for subduing the bandits and pass it off to the lord as his own achievement—but it was unlikely that was his intent, given that this exchange was taking place in front of so many mercenaries and guild staff members.

Personally, I didn't *want* the credit for capturing the bandits this time, or to be remembered by any of the empire's nobility. In fact, I would prefer to give the credit to the Silver Blades. However, since they were already famous as Gold-Rank mercenaries, it seemed unlikely they would take me up on that. They had no real need to accumulate achievements, like the Black-Fanged Dogs did. If anything, I had the impression he didn't want to try to steal someone else's credit, as doing so would only harm his own reputation. I figured it was likely he'd refuse me if I were to even offer.

Well, if we could get this handled with the bare minimum of interaction with any imperial nobility, I was all for it. I decided to accept his offer, but there was one matter I needed to clear up.

"We are incredibly grateful for your offer...but how should we handle payment for the transfer?"

Of course, just because a Gold-Rank mercenary group was taking over transporting our captives didn't mean they'd be doing it for free. It would be no exaggeration to say that *nothing* was free in this world. They wouldn't bother reaching out to me unless they were getting something out of it, or there were other strings attached.

It reminded me of when I'd healed the villagers' wounds with my magic back in the village. A short time later, some of the villagers I had healed looked at me like I was a strange spectacle, perhaps scared of the fact that I demanded no payment in return.

"No need to trouble yourself about the payment. We'll receive payment for the transfer from the guild directly. That's easier for the both of us, no?"

Brad's proposal was fine by me, but the guild staff was quick to butt in.

“W-wait a minute! Even if we want to go forward with your little plan, I don’t have the authority to approve a job request on behalf of the guild! And even if the guild *did* authorize payment for the transfer, there’s no way the job would be given to the Silver Blades!”

Everything he said was entirely reasonable. He didn’t have the authority to issue payments at his own discretion—the only person who could do that was the head of the mercenary guild. And even if the head of the guild approved payment for transporting the bandits, it was unlikely that the Silver Blades would be given the job. As a Gold-Rank group, they were likely much pricier than more run-of-the-mill mercenaries. Any reasonable guild leader would hesitate to use such a talented mercenary group merely to transport bandits.

However, it seemed Brad already knew that.

“Of course, there’s no need to trouble the guild with this. We’ll talk to the lord about having him pay the reward in the guild’s place. We haven’t seen much in the way of results where subduing the bandits is concerned, and considering both the guild and the lord certainly want them captured quickly, negotiations should go smoothly. Even if they fail, I promise to take the absolutely lowest payment I can to minimize the impact on the guild.”

Brad confidently pressed his point home with the guild staff. Apparently, he had relatively frequent contact with the local lord and could bypass the mercenary guild to negotiate a reward directly with said lord. Under normal circumstances, this could be perceived as an overreach—trespassing onto the guild’s territory—but the guild seemed fine with it, which suggested that Brad was closer to the lord than I originally thought. My policy of keeping my distance from the aristocrats of the empire might already be a moot point.

The guild staff finally seemed convinced. He stood up from his chair.

“All right, fine. I’m going to explain the situation to the head of the guild, then.”

After seeing the man off, Brad turned back to me.

“It may take a little time, but this matter should be settled soon. If you have any other requests, now’s your chance.”

I shook my head.

“No, as I said earlier, all I wanted to do was offload this problem of transporting the bandits onto someone else. Personally, I just want to head back to the village and report on the developments as soon as I can.”

It was pretty audacious for a bunch of new mercenaries to try and foist this task off onto a veteran group, but Brad showed no signs of disappointment. Instead, he simply nodded.

“No matter how talented they may be, it’s no wonder you’d worry about only two people watching over thirty bandits. I hope you can leave this task to me and return to the village shortly.”

This was an immensely convenient development, but I figured it was best to not dig too deeply into it. They might have their own reasons for what they were doing, and besides, none of it would negatively impact us.

“I appreciate you saying that. Do you think there’s anything the lord can do to help out the remaining women in the village? Also, how long will it take to prepare to transport the bandits?”

The village, now stripped of its laboring force, was under the lord’s control. If the Silver Blades really did have a close relationship with them, then it couldn’t possibly hurt to ask. Once the schedule was set, we could start thinking about where we’d go from here.

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll take direct command of transporting the bandits and also draw attention to the plight of the villagers. However, while we have horses to call upon at a moment’s notice, the carriages need to be prepared by the guild. Taking that in mind, I figure we should be able to leave the city around evening to arrive at the village around noon tomorrow.”

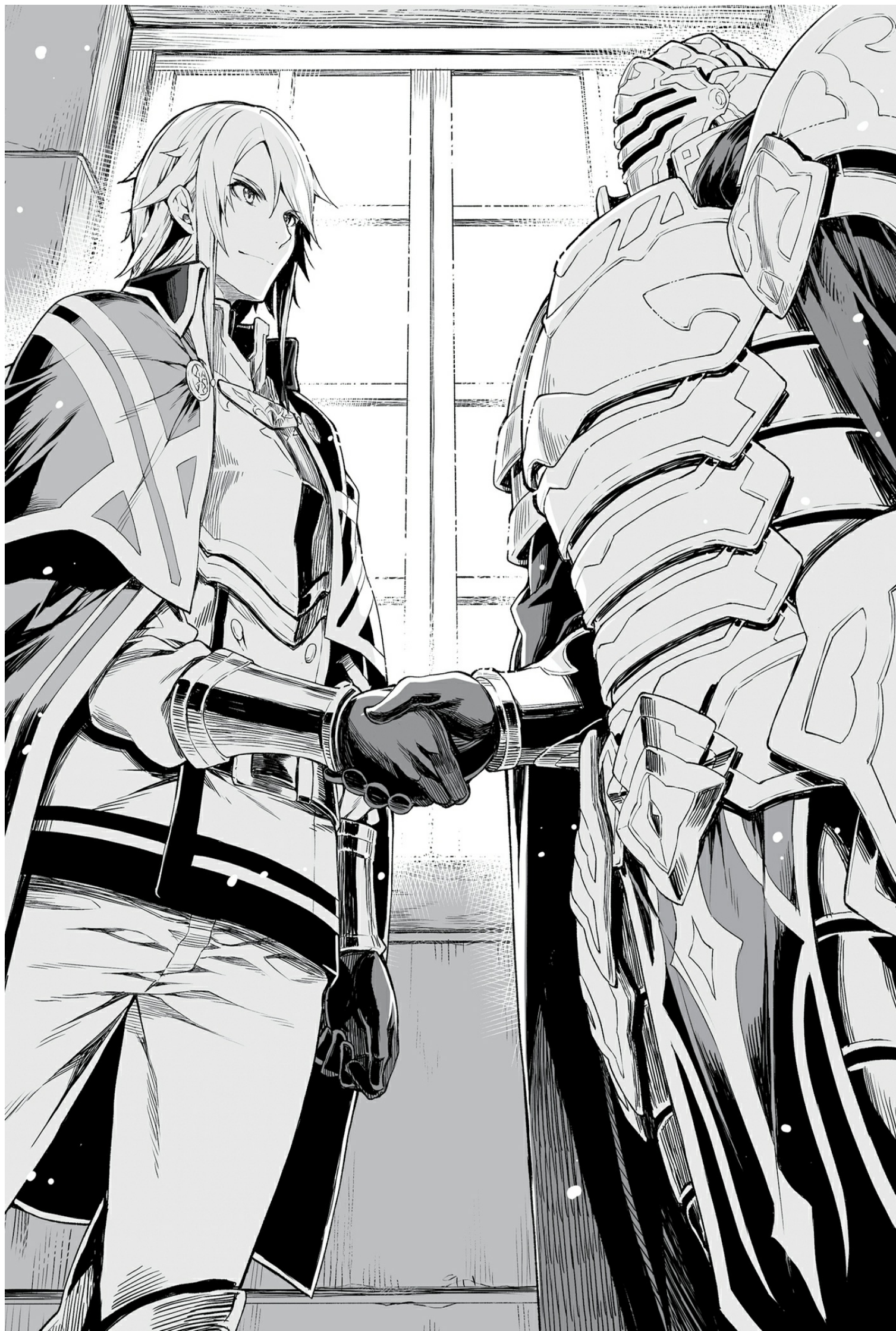
I was surprised. They’d be at the village much faster than I’d expected. Of course, it was just an estimate, not a guarantee, but there was nothing we could do about that.

“You’ve been a great help to me. Thank you.”

I extended my hand, which Brad firmly shook with a smile.

“There’s no such thing as charity. But you needn’t worry yourself about that.”

“All right then, I’ll head to the village and await your arrival.”



After thanking him, I quickly left the guild. My work in the city was finished for the day.

I'd return to the village later to explain the situation to Ariane and Chiyome, but it was still too early for me to head back, as the timeline wouldn't match up. For now, I'd just go check on the village from the outside. If everything looked normal, I would pop in tomorrow morning in order to secure my alibi.

And yet, we still had so much left to do. There was a lot on my mind as I absent-mindedly walked back to the abandoned mansion—then suddenly stopped in my tracks.

Oops. I'd almost gone back to the mansion completely out of habit. I'd be courting suspicion if I didn't secure my alibi by leaving through the city gate to head to the village.

I turned around on the spot and quickly headed to the city gate.

The atmosphere in the mercenary guild suddenly grew more hectic as the staff member's footsteps clacked loudly on the floor on his return from the back office. In his hand was something that looked like a job request.

The man spoke directly to Brad. "The guild head has granted permission to request the transfer of the men. Here's the job request."

Suddenly, he raised his head as if he'd just remembered something.

"Oh, where's the other man?"

He was referring to Arc of the Turbulent Ponta Patrol. Brad smiled cheerfully and waved his hand to dispel the staff's concerns.

"He went back to the village to see his friends."

The guild staff frowned slightly at this.

"That's going to be a problem. I wanted to talk about payment for them capturing the bandits."

"It's fine—they will return to the guild once the bandits have been transported. Anyway, since it will be up to us to handle their transport, I was

wondering if the guild could prepare some carts for us to use?”

This seemed to reassure the staff member, who immediately got to work. “Very well. Since this is an official guild request, we can certainly arrange some carts for you.”

He handed the request over to Brad and rushed back into the guild. After seeing the man off, Brad turned to Meel, at his side, as the two of them left the building.

“Are the bandits they captured the ones I’m thinking of?”

Brad moved through the bustling morning streets, his gaze fixed straight ahead, as he spoke to Meel.

Meel raked attentive blue eyes across their surroundings as she replied in a low, muffled voice, “I suspect as much. The messenger mentioned their hideout was near that village. The number of members sounds about right, too. I would never have thought they’d be the first to be captured.”

“This complicates our plans. There’s a silver lining in the fact that the men were captured and not killed outright—which means we can move on to the next step without needing to capture them ourselves. Now that the plan is in motion, we just need to perform our roles as well. Call the messenger to meet me at my home.”

Meel bowed to acknowledge Brad’s instructions and slipped away silently into the crowd.

After seeing her off, Brad looked up at the sky—the same rich blue as his own eyes. He thought back to the armored knight he had spoken to a short time ago.

“Will there ever come a day where we no longer need to draw our swords?”

His lips curled up into an embarrassed smile, even as the words left his mouth.

Then, as if nothing had happened, he moved forth and squeezed his way through the bustling crowd.

Early the next morning, I left Lalatoya for the village where Ariane and

Chiyome were standing watch.

Since I had created my teleportation point at the forest located on the outskirts of the village, I now found myself looking at the village from afar. From this distance, it didn't look as if anything had changed.

After entering through the gate and heading toward the square, I noted that the bandits were still bound. They all wore dark and sullen expressions, probably due to having been left out in the elements overnight.

The bandits tensed up at the sound of my approaching footsteps, but they seemed to relax slightly upon seeing that it was me. Their reaction struck me as odd—and it seemed like there were fewer of them than when I'd left—but it may have been my mind playing tricks on me.

Ariane and Chiyome appeared from somewhere deeper within the village while I was inspecting the bandits.

“Did you manage to make arrangements to transport them into the city, Arc?”

However, the bandits were probably even more interested in my response to Ariane's question than she was. There were some who were paying keen attention to our conversation, though that was only natural. Everyone had a stake in how they would be treated from here.

“Well, it was eventually decided that the Silver Blades would transport them.”

Ariane nodded at the mention of the familiar name we'd worked with in the past. She also seemed to consider them a highly skilled group. I hadn't had a chance to see Brad, their leader, or Meel, the group's chief, fight during the last job we'd done together, but I could still tell they were more than capable.

“In that case, there's nothing for us to worry about. I can't help but notice they're not here right now, though. Will they be meeting up with us later?”

I recalled the conversation I'd had earlier at the guild with Brad about the arrival of the transportation team. “Apparently, they'll be here around noon today at the earliest. It may be closer to evening, depending on how the preparations in the city go.”

Ariane stretched out her arms and rolled her shoulders to release some of the

stiffness.

“Great. Hopefully we won’t have any more issues.”

Between her remarks, tired appearance, and the odd way the bandits were reacting, I got the impression that something had happened while I was away. I leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

“Ariane, what happened to the bandits?”

She let her shoulders slump, looking exhausted.

“Several of the villagers attacked the restrained bandits last night. Two of them died of their wounds.”

Surprised, I looked at the bandits tied up in the square. Apparently, my instincts had been right. The strange tension I sensed from the bandits may have been their frayed nerves from being attacked the night before.

The villagers had seemed too afraid to even go near the bandits right after they were rescued, but with time, they’d probably understood the hoodlums were incapacitated and seen it as a great opportunity to extract revenge. Given what the bandits had done to these villagers, I didn’t feel much sympathy.

Ariane fought back a yawn and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “It was difficult just getting them to calm down.”

“That must have been rough. I can watch over the bandits until the transportation group gets here, so why don’t you go get some rest? Oh, I almost forgot. Glenys made you a quick breakfast.”

I took an object wrapped in a large plant leaf out of the leather pouch hanging from my waist and gave it to Ariane. The item was something like a cross between a hot dog and a sandwich, filled with steamed vegetables, baked sausages, and cheese.

“Thanks. Sorry to leave, but I think I’ll take you up on your offer.”

Ariane wandered off into a nearby house with Glenys’ breakfast in hand.

Though Chiyome must have endured a similar evening of standing guard in the village, she didn’t seem particularly tired as we saw Ariane off. I asked my young companion about her physical condition while handing over her share of

Glenys' breakfast.

"This is for you. Do you want to rest for a bit?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. I can stay up for several days on end."

I chuckled at her response. While Ariane was already an adult woman, Chiyome was still growing. It didn't seem good for her physical development for her to miss out on sleep.

"I think you should both get some rest. I can handle everything here."

She glanced down at her bread. I heard her stomach gurgle the moment she caught a whiff of what was inside.

"Well, if you insist."

Though she still looked reluctant, Chiyome followed after Ariane to sate her hunger.

"Kyii! Kyiii!!"

As I was watching Chiyome leave, Ponta suddenly appeared and sat down at my feet. One look at his glimmering eyes revealed that it was staring right at the leather bag hanging from my waist. Apparently, it was lured in by the scent of the hot dog sandwiches.

"Don't worry, she made breakfast for you too."

I took out a smaller version of the leaf-wrapped item I had handed earlier to Ariane and Chiyome. Just as I was about to unwrap it, Ponta rushed forward and yanked away the item, leaf and all. Judging by the way it was wagging its tail and stuffing its cheeks, it must have been pretty hungry. The leaf wrapping should be fine for it to eat—it might even be something like a salad for Ponta.

It would still be some time before the Silver Blades arrived, so I decided to kill some time watching Ponta eat while keeping an eye on the bandits.

The sun had risen high up into the sky by the time Ponta finally woke, having taken a quick nap on my crossed legs after enjoying its morning meal. It stretched out its front and then hind legs as it yawned.

“Kyii!”

It looked straight ahead, right out the village’s front gate. Apparently, our long-awaited visitors had arrived.

From outside the village came the sound of horse-drawn cart wheels falling in and out of well-worn ruts. The ruckus brought Ariane and Chiyome out to the square as well.

“Haaah, that was a good rest.”

The way Ariane stretched her body seemed to perfectly emphasize the shape of her chest, attracting the eyes of some of the bandits laying in the square. They sure seemed to be enjoying themselves, for men about to be carted off to prison. Maybe this was just the true nature of these pathetic men.

While my mind was wandering to such trivial matters, I finally saw someone ride into the square. Brad hopped off his horse.

“I was hoping to catch up to you, but I guess you were too fast for us, Arc!”

Considering he’d had to secure enough personnel to transport the bandits, line up payment, and make other arrangements, I had to say he’d made it here from Rontestatt in record time. He seemed a bit surprised that I’d been able to arrive at the village first, despite the heavy armor weighing me down. Of course, it was impossible for horses to outpace teleportation magic.

“Let’s just say my legs are pretty strong too.”

I glossed over the subject as I glanced over his shoulder, spotting Meel on horseback, two carts for transporting the bandits, and about fifteen mercenaries. Two carts for thirty mercenaries would be a little cramped, but comfort wasn’t much of a consideration when transporting criminals.

One man, dressed differently from all the others, hopped down from the cart. Though he wore a set of light armor like the mercenaries, he was unarmed, looking around the village with a sheaf of documents in hand. Judging by the fine make of his clothes, he wasn’t a commoner.

A commotion broke out throughout the village the moment the transportation team arrived in the village square. The villagers hesitantly

peeked out of the buildings they were hiding in to observe the strange scene.

Brad looked out over the restrained bandits held up in a crouching position in the square.

“This is a pretty impressive sight.”

Meel immediately went about instructing the other mercenaries to load the bandits into the carts. While the Silver Blades generally specialized in slaying monsters, they were quite skilled at this too, judging by how smoothly they loaded the resisting bandits into the carts.

“It looks like you’ve got this down pat.”

“Well, I guess we’ve worked a lot of different types of jobs.”

I sensed that Brad’s response held a much deeper meaning than he was letting on. Even if they specialized in slaying monsters, considering all the jobs they must have done to reach Gold Rank in the first place, this probably wasn’t the first time they’d had to transport bandits.

The members of the Silver Blades worked in unison to stuff the bandits into the carts like prisoners. With only two carts available for transport, each needing to hold over a dozen men, it seemed like the return trip would be quite slow. Alas, there wasn’t much we could do about that.

“Transport preparations are complete.”

Brad acknowledged Meel’s report.

“As planned, five guards will remain with the village while the rest will return to the city with the transport team.”

The mercenaries immediately set about their tasks according to Brad’s instructions, though they left me somewhat confused.

“You’re leaving some men here in the village?”

“When I discussed this matter with the lord, he decided to dispatch a clerk to inspect the damage. Around five people will stay behind to serve as his escort.”

Brad turned his gaze toward the official-looking man who was listening intently to the villagers. Apparently, he was a government official, and the lord

really was taking this situation seriously.

“I see. And so the rest of the group will transport the bandits?”

That might seem like a mere fraction of the men needed to transport around thirty bandits, but given their high mercenary rank, they should be fine. Frankly, all I wanted to do was leave the whole transport situation to the Silver Blades and step back, but that would probably seem unnatural. We should at least leave the village first, and as long as we were all taking the same road back to Rontestatt, we’d have to travel together.

“Ariane, it looks like we’re going to return to the city with them,” I whispered.

Ariane whispered back in agreement. “There’s nothing we can do about that. You can’t use your teleportation magic in public, anyway.”

“Will we be departing soon, Brad?”

“This kind of job doesn’t take much time at all. The gates will already be closed by the time we arrive if we leave for the city now, but there’s no need to worry. We have special permission to pass through.”

Brad called over his chief and gestured for the group to begin moving.

“Depart!”

Once the command was issued, the two carts and their mercenary escorts began to move. Ariane, Chiyome, and I collected our bags and followed them out of the village.

Ultimately, I’d had precious little contact with the villagers before leaving. However, considering I was busy carrying out a secret investigation here in the empire, I couldn’t do much more to help them.

Glancing back over the shoulder, I watched the village shrink into the distance.

The two carts rattled noisily down the poorly maintained road.

The bandits packed into the carts seemed to be in a bad mood, thanks to the unpleasant conditions and the uncomfortable way the cart swayed back and

forth, but a nearby mercenary would silence them with a sharp glare any time they complained too loud, keeping their grouching from getting out of hand.

Just because it was a day's journey back to Rontestatt didn't mean it actually involved a full day of travel. That was just a rough measure of the distance a horse-drawn vehicle could cover during the day. The actual duration of the journey depended on factors like the number of horses pulling the carriage, and how often the party stopped to take breaks. If cars existed in this world, we could have made the trip in under an hour.

When you had teleportation magic at your disposal, however, even the act of walking was incredibly frustrating. Fortunately, the transportation group moved at a fast clip—much faster than most merchants and their carriages. Looking closely, I could see that the horses pulling the carts were of a different breed from those usually seen in the city—quite possibly war horses.

I'd heard that horses used in military service were worth multiple times what a normal horse cost. Seeing that Brad was also riding a similar horse, I figured properly equipped mercenary groups like them must have their own horses.

Of course, it was also possible that the lord had provided the horses, but it seemed hard to believe they'd loan out military steeds just to transport bandits, given the current border issues. That would be a bit excessive for a mercenary group. Or maybe this was just the kind of treatment Gold-Rank groups could expect when hired?

As I walked behind the group, I started to wish that I could have just used my teleportation magic to teleport back first.

We made it back to the city after dark without any trouble, only taking a few breaks to rest the horses along the way. As soon as the city lights came into view, the mood of the whole transportation team seemed to relax slightly.

The city gates were closed, just as Brad had said, but it seemed they'd prepared for this upon their initial departure, and we just needed to follow a few procedures to reenter.

"I believe this is where we part ways so we can go hand over the bandits."

With that, Brad led his group toward the lord's castle.

There were still a fair amount of people in the streets, many curiously watching the group of mercenaries escorting carts full of men. The rumors had already begun to fly.

After watching the impressive group disappear off into the distance, I stretched my arms and glanced over toward Ariane. We were finally free of the whole situation.

“Well, we finally made it back.”

“Having to be on guard the whole time was tiring,” Ariane muttered under her breath. “That group is far too perceptive for our own good.”

Chiyome seemed to agree, letting out a sigh of her own. “You’re right. It’s nice to have them around when they’re on our side, but they could be worthy opponents if they ever become our enemy.”

I had to squint just to see the mercenary group now. Even though we’d only been together for a short period of time, Ariane and Chiyome seemed to have a good grasp of who we were dealing with. The Silver Blades were not a lawless sort, and were unlikely to become hostile in that respect, but taking into consideration how humans lived up here in the empire, inter-species conflict was a very real possibility. It would be foolhardy to get too close to them when we still didn’t know anything about their principles or values.

“Well, I hope we can continue to have a mutually beneficial relationship with the Silver Blades,” I said to no one in particular.

Ariane and Chiyome merely continued to stare after the now distant group. Ponta, who had been sitting quietly atop my head up until now, suddenly began to urgently wag its tail back and forth and cry out.

“Kyii!”

On our way back to the city, we’d only stopped once to eat a simple lunch, and we’d walked the whole way to boot. Clearly, Ponta was hungry. Ariane’s stomach also began to growl, though she quickly covered it with her hands and glared at me in embarrassment.

“Let’s head on back to Lalatoya and have some dinner.”

I turned and began to head in the direction of the abandoned mansion.

Now that I thought about it, there was something about the city that was different than usual tonight. As we continued to walk, I glanced over at Chiyome, noticing she also wore a peculiar expression on her face. Something told me that she wasn't simply worrying about what we were eating for dinner tonight.

I lowered my voice and called out to her. "What's wrong, Chiyome?"

She glanced up and returned my gaze.

"It's nothing. It's just... I can sense the presence of something lurking just at the very limit of my senses. It's been there for a while."

"What? Really?"

Ariane did a double take at Chiyome's response. However, even focusing in the direction Chiyome indicated, she didn't seem to find anything, but only cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"It's really faint, and I don't feel like I've been sensing it for a long time..."

Even Chiyome only had the vaguest impression of the presence, unable to grasp its true nature. Perhaps it was similar to the gaze I'd felt earlier through the fog?

"How about you, Ponta?"

"Kyiiiiii?"

Seeing as Ponta had proved to be even more capable at detecting undead than Chiyome, I decided to ask if it had felt anything, but Ponta only tilted its head to the side and stared ahead blankly.

If there really was a person out there watching us, they must be skilled enough to stay just at the edge of Chiyome's perception. Or perhaps they'd known from the start what the limits to Chiyome's senses were, and were toeing that line. I didn't know who the other party was, but considering this had only started once we made a name for ourselves as mercenaries here in the city, it was possible that it was a scout from another group.

"Hmm, I've lost them. Maybe they realized I picked up on their presence."

Chiyome turned around and looked back the way we came, almost as if she were looking for the presence she just lost. After a few moments, she shook her head and sighed in defeat.

Ariane looked back at her apologetically. “I’m sorry, Chiyome. My odd reaction probably spooked them off.”

Chiyome shook her head, seemingly unworried. “No, I couldn’t have chased down such a faint trail, anyway.”

Almost as if it sensed the awkward mood forming between the two, Ponta managed to break the tension with a mew. “Kyiiiiii.”

Puffing out its stomach from atop my head while slowly sliding down my helmet and wailing was probably Ponta’s way of telling me it was hungry.

I looked back and forth between the two while trying to comfort Ponta.

“For better or for worse, it’s undeniable that we stand out here. Going forward, we should be even more careful in the city. However, Ponta seems to be at its limit right now, so I suggest we head back to Lalatoya.”

“You’re right.”

“Agreed.”

It would do us no good to stand around and think about things we didn’t understand.

With our tentative marching orders decided, it was time for us to finish up for the day and head back for dinner and a bath. We hurried back to the vacant mansion, where I used my Transport Gate to return to Lalatoya.

The next day, I woke up later than usual, probably due to the late evening the night before. It was still morning, of course, but just not as bright and early as I was used to.

As per usual, Ponta licking my face served as a substitute for my alarm clock—though to be more precise, it was licking my skull, not my face.

“I guess I spent a little too long in the bath yesterday, huh.”

“Kyii.”

I stretched out as I yawned, leading to a cacophony of popping sounds as my stiff joints realigned. It made for a pretty nice sound, all considered, since I didn't have any muscles to interfere with the bones.

I continued my stretches as I made my way into the kitchen where I found Glenys cooking.

“Morning, Arc. Breakfast is ready, so come on and eat.”

I looked down at the prepared meal and thanked Glenys before noting that there was no one else at the table here with me.

“It looks great! By the way, where's Ariane off to?”

“They said they were going to train a bit outside until you woke up.”

I continued to listen as I chewed on a piece of bread. We'd been heading to Rontestatt early every morning or late, doing our work at the mercenary guild, and returning to Lalatoya at night, leaving them without any time for training. I felt like I was being treated like the odd duck out for oversleeping, but that was my fault.

“Sounds like I've kept them waiting, then.”

“Kyii.”

I picked up the pace and gobbled down my food before reaching for the cup. The white liquid inside had a distinct calcium flavor to it, almost like milk, but somehow even richer. I was sure people would fall in love if it could be made into some kind of ice cream.

“Kyii!”

“You want to try some too?”

At Ponta's behest, I poured some into its bowl and watched as it happily lapped the liquid up.

Listening closely, I could faintly hear Ariane's fierce cries as she practiced outside. Just like every other morning...though more relaxed than usual, now that I thought about it.

With breakfast finished, I put on my gear and made sure I had everything with me.

“Shall we get going?”

“Kyii!”

Upon stepping outside, I found Ariane and Chiyome holding their weapons at the ready. Once I entered their field of view, they lowered their weapons and picked up some hand towels to wipe away their sweat.

“So I see you’re finally up, huh Arc?”

“Good morning, Arc.”

I figured it was around 8 o’clock in the morning, but people out in this world tended to wake with the sun.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Shall we get going to the city now?”

Ariane slid her sword back into its sheath and tied back her messy hair as she spoke. “We were just waiting for you to wake up. I’m ready to go anytime.”

Chiyome was set to move, as well. “I’m ready too. We’ll be receiving payment for our work the other day, right?”

“Well, Brad mentioned that our capture of the bandits would likely be highly praised by the guild. I’m hoping that we might be promoted to Silver today.”

Once promoted to Silver Rank, we would be able to come and go from the city as we pleased. This would greatly extend the range of our search for the cardinals. With that, we could finally hang our hats up on playing mercenaries out in the empire.

“Let’s get going.”

Upon activating Transport Gate, a magic rune appeared at our feet, and we were temporarily plunged into complete darkness. After a moment of weightlessness, the world suddenly reappeared around us.

We were back in our usual room in the vacant mansion in the imperial city of Rontestatt. However, something was different. The ceiling...no, the roof was gone. Looking up, I could see the blue sky spreading out above us.

The charred beams—apparently all that remained of the roof—looked like the protruding spikes of a sea urchin, forming dark shadows that blotted out the blue sky. The walls were also charred black, and some of them had even burnt away completely, revealing the rooms beyond. Everything around us smelled of soot and charcoal.

“What happened?” My voice was a croak, surprised at the sudden change in our surroundings.

“Th-this...”

Ariane and Chiyome, much like myself, were also taken by surprise.

The moment I stepped forward to get a better look at my surroundings, I heard an unpleasant sound beneath my feet before the fragile floor gave way, and I fell down to the floor below.

“Gwa!!”

“Whaaa?!”

“Hyaau!!”

“Kyii!”



Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—the weight of my armor had been too much for the floor. Ariane and Chiyome plummeted after me, landing atop of me on the first floor. Chiyome was light and nimble like a cat, so she easily landed on her feet. Ariane, however, landed right on her rear in the middle of my back, while Ponta spread out its limbs to catch the wind on the membrane running between them and float gracefully down.

“Ow! What in the...!”

While she cursed at the pain of having landed full force on her rear, I glanced up at the ceiling. Ignoring the heavy weight pressing down on my lower back through my armor, I inspected the ceiling above us. It looked like the burnt and brittle floor had been unable to support our weight.

“Kyii.”

Landing on the soot-covered floor, Ponta sniffed at its pitch-black paws with great interest.

Chiyome ran her finger through the black soot on a nearby wall. “The whole mansion was burnt down.”

“A house fire, maybe? But no one was living here, I’m sure of that.”

Ariane got off my back and rubbed her sore bottom.

A normal house fire wouldn’t be all that surprising if people had been living here. It could have happened while cooking. But since the house was abandoned, it seemed much more likely that the fire was from an outside source.

“I suppose it could have been arson.”

Was it just a coincidence that this mansion was burned down? Chiyome had sensed someone keeping an eye on us before we returned to Lalatoya just the day before.

If these events were connected, it was possible that someone found out that we were using this mansion to teleport into the city, and burned it down. But did anyone out here have enough of a motive to want to get rid of us?

The Black-Fanged Dogs came to mind, but even though they didn’t care for us,

I doubted that they'd go so far as to burn down an entire mansion. We hadn't had much interaction with any other mercenary groups, nor had we even been in the city for very long. But it didn't seem like a mere coincidence.

Suddenly I heard Chiyome speak up as she inspected our surroundings. "I can feel the presence of multiple people outside the mansion."

There was a certain tension in her words, but Ariane looked out through a hole in the wall and shook her head.

"I can sense some people outside too, but I think they're just rubberneckers."

Chiyome focused her senses outward once again.

"That's probably right. It doesn't feel like they're looking for us, anyway."

The outer wall surrounding the mansion kept us from seeing out into the street, but that didn't seem to be a problem for her.

Considering there'd been nothing wrong with this mansion when we were here yesterday, that meant that it had both caught fire and extinguished by itself overnight. It was only natural that passersby would be drawn to such a scene. However, that also meant that we couldn't leave out the front entrance with so many people standing around gawking outside.

"We can't exactly walk out the front door with this many spectators."

"Kyii."

I crossed my arms as I thought, trying to come up with a way to get out of this mansion without drawing the attention of those standing around outside.

While I mulled over the issue, Ponta jumped up onto my arm and climbed up to my shoulder, where it began to clean its soot-stained coat. Glancing over, I saw little black paw marks running up and down my armor, like little stamps. I'd need to clean them up when I get home.

I could feel Ponta continuing to move about my shoulders as I turned my attention back to the mansion. Loud noises began to resonate through the burnt building, probably structural issues resulting from our earlier fall.

"This is no good. The building lost a lot of its integrity with our fall—it's going to collapse any minute."

The moment I heard Chiyome's words, I immediately reached out for the two women. "Ariane! Chiyome!"

They seemed to immediately guess what I was planning and reached out to take my hands.

"Dimensional Step!!"

I used my short-distance teleportation spell to first send us into the mansion's courtyard before teleporting onto the roof of a nearby mansion.

No sooner had we teleported away than the burnt building collapsed with a loud crash, sending a huge plume of ash and dirt up into the sky and eliciting screams from the surrounding observers.

"We barely made it."

"Kyii! Kyiii!!"

From our perch atop the neighboring mansion, we took a short rest while we contemplated the weight of the situation. Ariane sat down on the roof with a heavy sigh, slapping at her trousers to work out the soot.

"We were almost buried under all that rubble." Chiyome looked out at our surroundings, her keen gaze taking everything in.

"Do you think the fire was a coincidence?" I decided to ask her what I was thinking earlier. After a moment of silence, Chiyome shook her head.

"I can't say for sure, but I doubt it."

Apparently, she also thought there was a connection with the presence she felt yesterday. If so, who was it and why? Even though I knew it would do us no good to think about this now, I couldn't get it off my mind.

Finally, Ariane suggested our next plan of action.

"It might be a good idea to ask the rubberneckers over there about the fire in the mansion."

Chiyome and I exchanged glances before nodding.

"That's a great idea Ariane! Let's get going!"

"Whoa, hey, Arc?!"

I immediately grabbed Ariane's shoulder and Chiyome's hand and teleported again, this time to a side road right off the main street running in front of the burnt-out mansion. This put us right behind the people watching the scene.

"Hey, give me a heads-up the next time you plan on teleporting, huh??"

Ariane was annoyed that she had been sitting on the roof mere moments ago and was now sitting in the dirt. She stood up, brushing the dirt off the seat of her pants.

I offered up a quick apology as I stepped out into the main street and approached the crowd of people. Looking closely, I spied a guard standing in front of the front gate, probably to keep people out. It wasn't hard to imagine how much attention we would have drawn if we'd walked out the door.

I called to one of the rubberneckers who was looking at the mansion from a distance. He let out a yelp of surprise and turned around, looking even more stunned when he saw me.

"What's this crowd about?"

"Huh?? Oh, uh, a vacant mansion caught fire last night."

He must be a local resident. I felt a little sorry to have snuck up on him like this—it had to be intimidating to have a knight fully decked out in armor show up behind you.

"Arson?" I doubted he had much information, but I figured I might as well ask about the cause of the fire.

Much to my surprise, he shared some information about the circumstances surrounding the fire.

"I-it seems that way. The fire was quick and fierce and went through the whole building in a flash. The guards were saying some sort of accelerant must've been used."

The young man glanced over my shoulder. Looking back, I spotted Ariane, her cloak pulled low over her face, listening intently to his story.

"Did they catch the culprit?"

"Huh? Uh, I...I heard there were no witnesses."

He seemed more than eager to answer Ariane's questions, almost as if he could sense her beauty under the cloth. Ariane showed no interest in the man, but looked intently at her surroundings.

Chiyome also kept a close eye on the people out in front of the mansion, searching for any clues available in our surroundings. After a few moments, she turned around and spoke up.

"No one is watching us. If the arsonist were here, they would have already found us by now."

She frowned slightly, deep in thought. Apparently, she thought we were actually the arsonists' true target.

"Well, there's nothing more for us to do here. Let's get back to business." After watching the herd of people coming and going, Ariane finally suggested we make our exit. She was right. Staying here would solve nothing.

However...

"Our first order of business is to find a new teleportation point."

We'd almost certainly become the guards' number one suspects for the arson if we kept going in and out of that mansion. We needed to find a new location and sketch it by the end of today to prepare for our future activities, and we'd get right on that as soon as we received our reward from the mercenary guild for capturing the bandits.

With that in mind, we made our way toward the mercenary guild as Ariane suggested. It almost felt as if we were walking upstream against the crowd, as all the people flooded toward the mansion to get a peek.

Upon arriving at the mercenary guild, I had the distinct feeling that something felt out of the ordinary there. It only took me a moment to find the source of this feeling.

There was no mercenary standing guard at the entrance.

However, that wasn't all that was different. Chiyome suddenly tensed up and put her hand on her weapon while Ariane focused her gaze ahead.

"Kyii?" On the contrary, Ponta didn't seem to find anything unusual at all. It

just waved its tail back and forth across my head, as if everything were normal.

“What’s going on? Ariane, Chiyome?”

They both kept their eyes fixated on the guild, as if searching for the source of the problem.

“It smells like blood.”

Chiyome’s words caused me to refocus my attention on the guild. This was a profession where people were often exposed to blood when slaying monsters, playing escort, or subduing bandits. In that sense, the smell of blood coming from inside the guild was hardly out of the ordinary.

However, Ariane also looked cautious and uneasy. “I don’t sense any people.”

Her comment, combined with Chiyome’s earlier observation, made the mood feel tense. Though it wasn’t early in the morning, when the guild was busiest, there should still have been a lot of mercenaries and staff members around at this time of day. Instead, we had the scent of blood and no sign of people.

I walked quickly through the entrance, frowning involuntarily at the sight that awaited me. Ariane and Chiyome found themselves at a loss for words when they entered behind me.

“I can’t...!”

“But what...”

“.....”

All the guild staff who normally worked behind the reception counter were collapsed on the floor, bleeding. There were some mercenaries as well, also lying motionless on the floor. They had died with weapons still in their hands, suggesting they had been killed in combat.

Ariane inspected one of the bloody bodies before casting a cautious gaze across the room. “They were cut down with a single slash. Whoever did it was a gifted swordsman.”

“This looks like it could be some kind of magic.” Chiyome knelt beside a fallen mercenary and looked at the corpse. Many of the open wounds had gravel and rocks in them.

The fact that no one had noticed the devastation inside the guild, despite all the usual foot traffic passing by outside, indicated it had happened only moments ago. Moreover, judging from the various injuries the men had sustained, it seemed this was the work of multiple people.

“But who would have done this?”

“Kyii!”

As I walked through the guild to get a look at the situation, I suddenly heard Ponta let out a cry from atop my head, as if it had found something.

“What is it, Ponta?”

“Kyii.”

Ponta leaped off the top of my head and glided around the room for a moment before landing on the back of one of the fallen staff members behind the counter.

“Hnng...” The man shuddered slightly and moaned. I’d thought they were all dead, but this one appeared to still be breathing, if grievously injured.

“Whoa...!”

I hurriedly rushed over to see how bad the injury was.

A single vertical slash tore through the flesh along his back. The amount of blood he’d lost looked fatal, but as long as he was breathing, there was still a chance to heal him.

“Over Heal!!”

A dazzling ray of light welled from my hand and poured out over the man’s wound, which closed up in the blink of an eye. It looked like time was being rewound, though sadly, it did nothing for the lost blood.

The light subsided and the dying man calmed down a bit, though his face was still pale from blood loss.

“Arc! There’s a survivor?!”

Ariane rushed over to see what I was doing and was surprised to find the unconscious man at my feet. Chiyome hurried over in a panic as well, but for an

entirely different reason.

“Fire...!”

Tongues of flame licking toward me before the building erupted into flames all around us, creating an impenetrable wall of fire. Looking around, I saw the whole guild was already engulfed in flames. It had all happened so suddenly that I was at a loss for words.

However, a highly experienced soldier like Ariane was able to quickly evaluate the situation and start issuing orders. “Chiyome, I want you to take point while Arc carries this man out!”

The same could also be said about Chiyome, who nodded in agreement and immediately began to draw a rune in the air.

“Body to water! Liquid wolf fang!”

Once her technique was activated, two wolves made completely of water were spawned into existence. They sprinted around her, instantly extinguishing the flames they ran through and slowing down the raging inferno.

“Let’s go!”

At Chiyome’s command, the water wolves began to lead the way, carving a path through the sea of flames toward the exit as Chiyome and Ariane followed close behind.

“Whoa, hey! Wait up!”

I ran out of there with Ponta under one arm and the guild employee under the other. The moment we exited the fire-wreathed building, it felt like we had just stepped out of a sauna. However, with the mercenary guild now going up in flames behind us, a noisy crowd began to form, drawn in by the fire.

Two people, probably guards, held their spears out at the ready.

“You there, stop!!”

“Did you set the guild ablaze?!”

I instinctively glanced over at my two companions. Ariane tugged the hood of her cloak down lower and averted her gaze, while Chiyome had already

managed to make her water wolves disappear.

I stood at the front of the group, presenting the eye-catching picture of a knight with the guild employee and Ponta tucked under each arm.

“We did nothing of the sort! I was the one who rescued this fallen staff member!”

The two guards pointing their spears at me quickly apologized, though clearly still skeptical about the whole situation. But that would soon change. The flames burning through the mercenary guild swelled even further, rising high up into the sky and eliciting screams from those who had gathered to watch.

At the same time, similar fires began shooting up around the city, followed moments later by cries of confusion off in the distance. All of the rubbernecks who’d gathered to gawk at the sad fate of the mercenary guild immediately took off running. The guards were lost in the fleeing mass and bothered us no more.

“What is going on here?” Ariane stared in disbelief at the scene unfolding throughout the city around us.

“Uhnnggh...!”

The man under my arm began to moan as he regained consciousness. I hurriedly lowered him into a sitting position on the street corner.

“Are you okay? Who did this to you?”

He looked confused, probably from all the blood loss, but managed to raise his head and meet my gaze.

“The...masked...”

The strength left him and he collapsed on the spot. I brought my hand to his mouth, but he was no longer breathing. I’d been too late—he’d lost too much blood to survive. But with his wound now healed, his death would certainly raise suspicion.

Having come to terms with his death, I stood up and took a look at the chaos engulfing Rontestatt. Things were certainly moving now, but in what direction, I could not say.

Chapter 4:

A City in Chaos

A MOUNTAIN RANGE running from northeast to southwest served as the empire's natural western border, separating the Great Revlon Empire from the Aspania Kingdom. There was only a single break in that border: a relatively narrow river that could be crossed on horseback.

This river, which flowed through the mountains, was the only point connecting the empire and the kingdom. Therefore, the empire could stop the kingdom from advancing into its territory by guarding that one point. It had built a fort near the river on its side and stationed troops there. Rontestatt, a border town, was responsible for supplying the fort.

Only a small contingent of soldiers, maybe about a single battalion's worth, were stationed at the fort during peacetime operations. The majority of the rest were based back in the city of Rontestatt, from where they would be dispatched to the fort in the event of an emergency. The fact that the fort was currently packed with a brigade of 2,500 soldiers spoke to the situation they now found themselves in.

Aspanian soldiers were also gathering on the opposite bank across the river, numbering around 10,000. The massive force had only suddenly appeared a few days prior and set up camp opposite the fort, glaring hatefully at the empire.

The soldiers crammed into the fort belonged to one of the four armies operated by the empire, known as the western imperial army. Though its full strength was nearly double that of the soldiers waiting across the river under the banner of the Aspania Kingdom, not all of the troops were waiting near Rontestatt.

In peacetime, the imperial army was sent out on company and battalion-scale missions to wipe out monsters and bandits, settle disputes for local nobility, and more. They had multiple bases beyond Rontestatt. Obviously, not all of these soldiers could be immediately mustered in event of an emergency. The

territory covered by the western imperial army was huge, and it had seemed a waste to leave a great many soldiers stationed here during peacetime, in the past, all while the Aspania Kingdom did nothing.

What was more, the fort by the river wasn't all that big to begin with. With the number of brigades now packed in there, it was nearing its maximum capacity. To bring in more troops, they would need to start building camps on the river plains like the Aspanian soldiers had, and the limited number of soldiers available to them at present meant those Aspanian soldiers would almost certainly cross the river and defeat them the moment they began construction.

This meant they had to gather a large number of soldiers in the rear and send them to the border all at once. Until then, they had no choice but to rely on the power of the fort to keep the Aspania Kingdom from crossing the border.

The situation had created an atmosphere of great tension within the fort. Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, the soldiers of the Aspania Kingdom stayed at their camps, watching the fort as they prepared for war...or so they thought.

Although they kept a close eye on the movements within the imperial fort, the atmosphere in their camps was relatively relaxed, with most soldiers busy training, gambling, or just cleaning their weapons. The mood was light compared to that in the fort, almost like they were on a break between operations.

The sight was enough to cause one of the Aspanian knights to seethe—and he wasn't the only one. There were many who were dissatisfied with the current situation, especially in light of the effort it had taken to gather so many soldiers to face off against the imperial fort. After all, the feud between the Aspania Kingdom and the Great Revlon Empire was long and storied.

While the Aspania Kingdom was now located at the western end of the empire, that was not always the case. Its former royal capital was once located on the same spot where Vittelvarlay, the imperial capital of the Great Revlon Empire, now stood. Aspania had lost the capital when the Revlon Empire invaded from the north and drove them out west.

When the Revlon Empire split into the dual east and west empires at the end of a long struggle for the throne, the Aspania Kingdom had tried to regain the territory lost to the empire. But they'd been just barely treading water at the time, unable to spare the manpower necessary to recapture their lands. The Aspanian people, driven from their fertile lands to eke out a meagre existence, told their descendants of the awful treatment they suffered at the hands of the empire, creating an entire generation that wanted nothing more than to take back what they had lost.

It was easy to understand why many soldiers might feel frustrated to be sitting here doing nothing, so close on the cusp of overthrowing the empire. Others, however, had the patience to maintain their cool and bide their time. The difference lay in whether they knew what this invasion really meant, or whether they didn't.

A knight cleaning his sword muttered aloud, "When are we going to make a move to take the empire? It's been three days since we arrived."

Another knight who overheard him smiled broadly. "What? You don't know what's going on?"

The knight who spoke initially was flustered by the response, but dared not reveal it.

Most knights were also aristocrats, which meant their royal standing could be deduced just by their appearance and their armor. When invited to join combat, aristocrats were given information about the details and circumstances of the battle to come. Most foot soldiers, on the other hand, were never briefed about things like the political motives or objectives of the war.

To be ignorant of such details at the onset of battle implied that you were an ill-informed aristocrat. However, while the same broad term might be used to describe them all, not every aristocrat enjoyed the same status. Someone from an aristocratic family that held political power, for example, would have information leaked to them by family members. A low-titled third or fourth son, however, would likely be told nothing.

In other words, knowing the real reasons for this war meant that you were a high-ranking aristocrat or closely connected to someone well-informed. If you

didn't watch your mouth, you could cause trouble for yourself the future.

"Unfortunately, my family isn't blessed with such information," the man replied humbly as he turned to the other knight.

The other man glanced around before lowering his voice. "This isn't a full-fledged invasion. We're here to put pressure on the empire from the west."

Hearing this, the man cocked his head to the side. "But to what end?"

Although proud to be a member of the Aspania Kingdom's elite army, he knew there was a significant difference between the power their kingdom could bring to bear and that of the Great Revlon Empire. Even a blitzkrieg attack on the imperial capital would be unlikely to succeed, to say nothing about gathering all of their troops in one place to draw the attention of the imperial army. There was simply no way they could win that way.

The man's question must have been clear on his face, as the other, better-informed of the two lowered his voice even further.

"The Great Revlon Empire is being invaded by the other empire. Our kingdom is putting pressure on it from the west, forcing the Great Revlon Empire to deal with threats on both sides."

After offering up his explanation, the man let out a laugh, revealing that he had also heard the story from somewhere else. The knight cleaning his sword let out a heavy breath at the realization that his conversation partner was of a similar social standing to himself.

"Hmm, that would make sense. But the idea of helping the eastern empire leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, even if it's in the name of weakening the Great Revlon Empire."

The other man nodded in agreement.

To Aspania Kingdom, both the eastern and western empires were enemies who'd taken territory from them. Even if their actions weakened the Great Revlon Empire, which they shared a border with, the thought of helping the Holy East Revlon Empire was unpleasant. But if the Great Revlon Empire used the full force of its army to crush the Holy East Revlon Empire, they might restore the former Revlon Empire to its former glory and become even stronger

than before. If that happened, the odds of recapturing their former lands would become even more remote.

Thus far, the Aspania Kingdom had yet to publicly express any hostility toward the Great Revlon Empire. It would do them no good to recklessly provoke an opponent that could easily wipe them out if they wanted to. Instead, they had focused on strengthening their own forces. As a result, the empire was no longer particularly wary of the kingdom.

The western imperial army, which was charged with protecting the empire's western border with the Aspania Kingdom, was traditionally considered the weakest of the four imperial armies. While the Aspania Kingdom hadn't shown itself to be a threat to the empire, they were able to draw sufficient attention now by merely bringing their forces to bear along Great Revlon Empire's western border, even as it was being invaded by the east empire.

If they focused their attention on the Aspania Kingdom, it would delay their response to the invasion from the east. This, in turn, would gradually eat away at the empire's strength.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Aspania.

As the men spoke, a sliver of smoke rose up in the eastern sky and the camp suddenly began to rustle to life. The two knights stopped to look up as a messenger ran through the camp, heading straight toward a large tent located at the back of the camp.

The knights standing guard at the tent's entrance held out their weapons and ordered the messenger to stop. However, the moment they caught sight of the emblem on his arm, they saluted and opened the entrance for him.

The messenger saluted back and shouted into the tent to make his presence known.

"Excuse me!"

The messenger entered to find a long, narrow table sitting across from the entrance, at which were seated many nobles dressed in military guard. A young, well-dressed man occupied the furthest seat. His dark gray hair was cut short and neatly combed, and his sharp blue eyes stood in contrast to his fair skin. He

wore the same military uniform as the others, though his chest was marked with the crest of Aspania's royal family.

His name was Quintil—Crown Prince Quintil Aspania Gotis of the Aspania Kingdom.

A muscular man dressed in a military uniform, standing at the crown prince's side, shot a harsh gaze at the messenger as he entered the tent.

"State your business."

The messenger offered back a salute and explained. "We spotted a smoke signal in the direction of Rontestatt! The smoke is white!"

The message caused a commotion throughout the tent. The crown prince, however, merely smirked.

"Sire..."

Quintil stood up at the behest of the muscular man at his side.

"The time has come. It's time for us, after years of suffering at the hands of the empire, to finally take our first step. For the first time in history, all eyes in the western imperial army will be fixed on us. Advance on the fort!"

At Quintil's command, everyone in the tent stood up and saluted in unison. They then hurried out of the tent and gave the order to advance, which was met with loud cheers.

"Just what's going on here?"

"Kyiii..."

I watched tongues of fire lick across the city of Rontestatt. Ponta gazed anxiously as people screamed and cursed throughout the city.

The fact that various parts of the city were being set ablaze at the same time as the guild was attacked was testament to the fact that this was all preplanned. I'd wondered if the city was under attack, as one of the guild officials had previously told me things were getting tense—but apparently, it wasn't that simple.

I heard a loud scream near the street and saw a crowd of people running away from something. Three goblins chased them in hot pursuit.

I'd seen these monsters before. They stood about a meter tall, their spines bent forward, and could be identified by their dull green skin and unusually swollen stomachs. Their large, pointed ears were reminiscent of the elves, but everything else, from their bulbous eyes and the wide mouths that looked like ear-to-ear gashes in their faces, gave them an altogether hideous appearance. The goblins were armed with stone axes and clubs that dripped with reddish-black goop.



Perhaps they were the ones who were attacking the inhabitants of the city?

Watching them chase after and swing their weapons at the fleeing residents was all the evidence I needed. Without a moment's hesitation, I drew the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg from my back and swung it.

“Wyvern Slash!!”

An invisible blade shot forth from the tip of my sword and found its mark, cleaving the three goblins right in half and dropping them on the spot. It was all thanks to my training that I'd been able to react so quickly and hit the group with such precision.

I was feeling pretty good about how much I'd improved when I suddenly heard another group of people screaming from the direction I'd just sent my attack.

“Oh no, the roof suddenly shattered! Run!!”

Turning in the direction of the screams, I noticed that the slash I'd sent had gone straight through the goblins and shattered the roof on the building across from us.

“What?!”

While it might be safe to use in open fields and forests, this technique was clearly no good in enclosed spaces with buildings all around. Glad no one was hurt, I decided to pretend I hadn't seen anything. It had been an emergency, after all.

“Arc!”

I heard Ariane call out to me and reflexively tensed up.

“Wh-what is it??”

I looked back to see Ariane draw her sword and point down the street. Glancing in that direction, I spotted a number of goblins and orcs roaming the streets.

Rontestatt was located along the national border and thus surrounded by a massive wall. It was hard to believe these monsters had all gotten here on their

own. Chiyome, meanwhile, had climbed up onto a nearby house to get a better look off into the distance.

“I can sense monsters roaming all throughout the city.”

Apparently, a great many monsters were now running wild in the city. But how did all of them get here?

This whole situation was oddly reminiscent of the undead armies in the former Holy Hilk Kingdom.

“What should we do, Arc?”

I turned my attention to the tragedy unfolding throughout the city.

If this was all due to a battle with a neighboring country, we needn't get involved. In fact, we *shouldn't* get involved, since we were only here on a secret mission.

I could simply use Transport Gate to return us to Lalatoya. If we returned to the village now, however, we'd only be able to teleport back to the burnt-down mansion here in the city. Since the teleportation point would take us to what had once been a room on the second floor, we would almost certainly plummet to the first floor the moment we appeared...though it was unlikely any of us would be injured by that.

We had been working as mercenaries in this city, albeit briefly. If we had to fly under the radar, I figured we could still act like mercenaries and protect the people. Besides, if things spiraled out of control here, it might hinder the rest of our mission in the empire.

“Let's keep acting like mercenaries, then. If we can show off what we've got here, there's probably a promotion to Silver Rank waiting for us on the other side.”

Ariane gave me an odd look.

“I figured that's what you'd say.”

“Sounds like you read my mind, then!”

I meant to convey to her how impressed I was, but for some reason, I was only met with a deep blush and an angry outburst from Ariane. “It just means

that you're easy to read, okay!"

"Kyii! Kyiii!!" Ponta also chimed in from atop my helmet.

Honestly, I fancied myself as deeper than that.

Chiyome hopped down from the roof and landed easily on the ground.

"By the way, where are we headed?"

I looked around for a moment to check our surroundings before taking off at a run. Since we didn't really know who or what was causing the chaos in Rontestatt, I didn't have a clear destination in mind. However, I could hear screams all through the city, so I could at least gauge where there was some sort of clear threat.

Which could only mean...

"We just have to go in the opposite direction to the fleeing citizens!"

Ariane caught up quickly and held pace at my side as we ran against the flow of the crowd.

"Up ahead!"

Chiyome's warning reached me at exactly the same moment as I saw her close in on a goblin that just rounded a corner up ahead. She approached the hungry goblin, her dagger already swinging, and its head parted company with its torso. The impact of the slash sent the decapitated head flying off into the distance. Chiyome didn't even pause long enough for the blood to begin spouting from its body before she was off again.

She made quick work of her opponents, almost like some sort of demon.

"Gwaufoo!"

An orc nearly twice the goblin's size stomped on what was left of the torso as it stepped into view. The moment it laid eyes on the petite Chiyome, it swung its crudely fashioned club right toward her.

However, Ariane was faster than the lumbering beast, and she lunged ahead with her sword.

"Gyafoogh?!"

Her sword pierced easily through the thick layer of fat covering its back, slid through its lung, and erupted out of its neck. The orc spat blood with a cry of agony before dropping on the spot.

Two more goblins appeared, but they fell to Ariane and Chiyome before they even had time to blink. By the time I finally caught up, there were no more monsters left to fight.

I was so much slower to react than my two companions that I was starting to have doubts about how much I could bring to the team right now. I figured I could probably keep running after them, but all I'd be doing was watching their backs the whole time. In that sense, it might be more efficient for us to each move independently...though given how little we knew about what was going on, that might be unwise.

"Kyiiii, kyii."

I wasn't sure if Ponta was trying to comfort me, or simply amazed at how useless I was, but I could feel it batting the top of my helmet with its paws.

Lowering my gaze, I caught sight of something odd on the fallen orc's torso. Ariane looked back at me curiously when she noticed what I was doing.

"What's wrong, Arc?"

Instead of answering, I rolled the limp orc's body over to expose the nape of its neck. There was a very familiar pattern etched into it. It looked almost like a simple coat of arms, or the kind of emblem you'd find on a car. In fact, it looked just like the one on the bandits who took over the village.

"Ariane, Chiyome, look at this. Does it look familiar to you?"

The two glanced at one another and then down at the orc's neck.

"Kyii?" Ponta looked down too, cocking its head to the side in curiosity.

Ariane looked confused, but Chiyome seemed to figure it out right away. "This is... There was something similar on the bandits we captured."

That was all the convincing I needed to know it wasn't just my hazy memory.

"Oh, so you remember it too! That's right, the bandits all had similar patterns on them."

Ariane asked the only logical question. “So...what does it mean?”

However, Chiyome and I merely exchanged glances before shaking our heads. While we were sure the brand on these monsters was the same as the one marking all the bandits who’d taken the village, we had no idea what it actually meant.

“I don’t know what the brand means, but I’m sure there’s some kind of connection between the bandits and monsters.”

Chiyome checked the nape of the goblin’s neck where its torso lay still on the ground next to her, and confirmed that it bore the same mark, further cementing our suspicions.

“In other words, whoever was involved in the occupation of the village is also pulling strings behind the scenes for this attack on the city.”

I nodded in agreement with Ariane’s assessment. It made sense to consider the attack on Rontestatt as a direct assault on the border city, while the attack on the satellite village had been an indirect one.

“In that case, the Aspania Kingdom would have the most to gain from these attacks.”

If the kingdom and the empire went to war, the city would be an indispensable supply depot for the imperial soldiers holding the front line. The guild staff had said the soldiers couldn’t help transport the bandits because they’d all been sent to the border, which suggested the city’s defenses were weakened. If a city behind the battle lines was attacked while the soldiers’ attention was focused on the border, it would hurt their morale.

“But what’s the point of this brand? It just makes it easier to figure out the connection between the attacks.”

Diversionary attacks such as this were usually carried out in secret. Or was there a reason they wanted us to make the connection?

Suddenly, I sensed something at the edge of my awareness.

“We don’t have time to think about that now.” Ariane lunged ahead and slashed a goblin that had suddenly jumped from a dark alley down which it had

been chasing some residents, felling it with just one blow.

She was right. Now was not the time.

“You’re right!”

I rushed after Ariane into one of the city’s major thoroughfares. There, I spotted a group of armed men escorting the residents to safety to escape the monsters and fire.

Though the weapons they wielded varied, the group were all garbed in a black color scheme reminiscent of a mercenary group we previously worked with—the Black-Fanged Dogs. They didn’t wear any signature emblems, like the Silver Blades, so it was hard to be sure, but there was no doubt in my mind that they were mercenaries.

The mercenaries were distracted by the goblins immediately in front of them, unaware of the three orcs approaching from behind. We rushed ahead to reinforce them, but it seemed unlikely we’d arrive in time.

“Behind you!”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have even said anything at all. The mercenary turned to look at me running in their direction—the direction opposite to the real threat—and started to call out to me. The next second, the orcs hit them from behind.

Could I have made it in time if I used my teleportation magic? For a moment, I began to doubt my plan to suppress our abilities. But I had no choice but to accept it was the right choice when weighed against the danger of blowing our cover while infiltrating the empire.

I swung my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and slashed one orc in two, dodged an attack from the second with its crudely fashioned club, and then sent it flying with a kick.

“Kyii!”

Ponta, still wrapped around my neck, let out a cry as if to tell me it spotted something. A moment later, Ariane ran right past me and landed several blows into the orc I’d kicked away. She pierced its throat and heart, killing it instantly.

Chiyome flew past me toward the last remaining orc and lopped off its head

with her dual daggers, the force of the blow sending its head spinning into the air.

The mercenary who had just been hit by the orc took one look at me.

“It’s... it’s those Ponta fools!!”

Thanks to the crude quality of the orc’s club, it seemed his injuries weren’t fatal.

“Kyii!” Ponta cheerfully cheeped back in response.

The mercenary hesitated at the sight of Ponta, at a loss for words.

The number of mercenaries referring to us as “Ponta” or “Ponta Patrol” were on the rise and, thanks to Ponta’s amusing reaction, this only seemed to keep increasing. Most people seemed to think it had a nice ring to it, but others considered it ridiculous.

These mercenaries were members of the Black-Fanged Dogs, the same group who’d joined us on the previous herb collection escort mission. The man stood up and glared, looking as if we had injured his pride by helping him. It was kind of gutsy of him to remain defiant under the current circumstances, but now was not the time for that.

“Don’t let your guard down, or you’ll get smacked again!”

Even if we weren’t going to be friends, there were more important things for us to do right now. The mercenaries didn’t seem to take kindly to this, shooting me hostile glares.

The mood was quickly dispelled, however, when a crowd of screaming people emerged with goblins in tow. The fight was on once again.

The mercenaries of the Black-Fanged Dogs raised their weapons and went back on the offensive.

“Kyii!”

Ponta cried out a warning that there were threats other than the goblins and Ariane, Chiyome, and I began scanning our surroundings.

I heard a whistling noise approaching from somewhere, and turned my eyes

in that direction. A number of white streaks of smoke rose high into the sky before arching back down—right toward us.

“What’s that?”

It slammed into the ground a moment later. The smoke coming off of it was so thick that I couldn’t see anything.

“What is this thing?!”

“A smoke bomb?”

I could hear Ariane and Chiyome’s surprised voices through the smoke, along with the sounds of clashing swords and screams.

“Guwaaaaa!”

“Why you...!!”

“Hyaaaaa!!”

The primary voices probably belonged to the mercenaries. Had they been struck by the goblins? But too little time had passed between the moment I could no longer see and the screams for the goblins, who were slow, to strike.

Suddenly, Chiyome and Ariane jumped out of the smoke and held their weapons at the ready.

“Be careful! There’s a new enemy!”

Right as I was listening to Chiyome’s warning, something popped out of the smoke. Ariane and Chiyome both struck at it with their weapons, though they were met with a high-pitched metallic sound.

“Nuah!”

Something dove at me as well, but I managed to narrowly escape by batting it with my cloak. The object clanged loudly onto the cobblestones. It looked like some kind of elongated knife.

However, I had no time to inspect it. In nearly the exact same moment, three black shadows popped out of the smoke.

The figures were dressed entirely in black and all wore the same mask. Their costumes were reminiscent of ninjas, and for a moment, they reminded me of

Chiyome the first time I'd met her. However, unlike the daggers Chiyome wielded, each of these masked ninjas bore their own weapon of choice.

One of them, armed with a longsword and shortsword, immediately engaged with Chiyome, sparks flying between the two of them.

Chiyome charged straight into the masked ninja with everything she had, causing her opponent to falter. She tried to take advantage of this opportunity and launched a renewed offensive, but he soon drew back.

Another masked ninja wielding a one-handed mace approached Ariane, but she easily dodged the first strike, met the second with her sword, and then knocked her opponent back with a swift kick. An anguished cry escaped from under the mask as the figure flew across the street and crashed into a stall. A moment later, however, he was back on his feet.

The third masked ninja, armed with a longsword and focused on me, lunged in for a quick strike, but I was able to deflect it with my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg. However, my opponent responded dynamically to each move I made, adjusting his strikes as he pressed the offensive.

Thanks to my special training with Glenys, I was, surprisingly, able to anticipate the direction of each strike and move my sword to match it. After several bouts, the masked ninja withdrew to create some distance between us.

He looked down at his own sword, almost as if in surprise. That made sense, considering that his sword was likely chipped all over from each time our blades met.

"The fact that your sword doesn't break even in the face of the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg says much about your skill. Just who are you?"

The mythical Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg could cut through even a dragon's scales. Any normal sword that took such a blow would have broken. The only reason this one hadn't was because my opponent had angled the blade ever so slightly each time the blades met.

Glenys was particularly skilled at that technique and, even though she and I were only practicing, exchanging blows with my opponent felt similar to the sensation of crossing blades with her.

But he's certainly not as good as her.

There was a tense moment of silence. My masked opponent seemed slightly shaken.

"How's it going? Still alive?"

It seemed as if the masked ninjas were checking on one another. The other two masked men flanked the man with the longsword and shook their heads. Then, the man with a mace took something out of his shirt and tossed it toward me.

I tried to dive backward, but the world in front of me was suddenly filled with smoke again, leaving me unable to see anything. Wary of further surprise attacks, I held up my shield and focused on my surroundings, but nothing else happened.

"Ariane, Chiyome, are you okay?!"

I received an answer through the smoke. "It looks like they've withdrawn."

"I'm fine."

Eventually, the wind blew away the smoke and I was able to spot Ariane and Chiyome. It looked like the goblins had disappeared with the smoke too, perhaps wanting to avoid getting caught up in the fierce battle with the masked ninjas. We were immersed in silence.

"I suppose they're the ones responsible for all this?"

If those masked ninjas were working with the Aspania Kingdom to capture Rontestatt, then that probably meant they were some sort of secret operatives.

Once the smoke cleared and we could finally get a good look at our surroundings, I saw the members of the Black-Fanged Dogs had all been killed. Stomachs cut open, heads lopped off, crushed heads...they were brutalized. However, this appeared to be the work of goblins and not the masked ninjas.

"They're pretty talented. I can't sense them anymore."

Chiyome tried to pick up any sounds with her renowned cat ears, but finally shook her head, as if the big hat she was wearing as a disguise were getting in the way.

“I have mixed feelings about supporting the empire.” Ariane readjusted her cloak and let out a sigh.

I understood where she was coming from. The empire oppressed both elves and beast people, and the Aspania Kingdom was standing up against them. Fighting supposed operatives of Aspania was tantamount to taking the empire’s side. However, we knew nothing about what kind of country the Aspania Kingdom was, so we were in no position to ally with either of them.

I figured it was about time we moved on, since there were no more monsters in the area. But just then, a familiar figure appeared from the end of the street. He was dressed in black leather armor and wielded a long-handled battle axe.

Gramn, the leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs, ran straight toward me the moment he laid eyes on us. “I knew it! You were working with them!!”

He struck at me with his battle axe, probably because I was standing at the front of the group and was the most prominent of the three of us. I met his battle axe in mid-swing with my shield, sending it smashing into the cobblestone road with a terrifying clang.

“Nuuaaa!!”

However, Gramn immediately hefted his axe to strike again, this time in an upward sweeping motion. I once again met his blow with my shield, knocking him off balance. I held my sword at the ready.

“What do you think you’re doing, Gramn?! I pose no threat to you!”

This only seemed to anger him more. “What am I doing?! My men, they’re dead!!”

We had nothing to do with the deaths of the men littering the street, but we no doubt looked suspicious, standing nearby with weapons drawn.

But it’s a complete misunderstanding.

“Wait, wait, we didn’t do it!”

“Shut up! I’m not about to let you keep destroying my hometown!”

He swung his battle axe several more times, though I deflected each blow with my shield. So Gramn was from Rontestatt?

I dove back to put some space between us, shaking my head to clear it of any other distractions. Ariane, who had been watching the scene from a distance, called out to me with a look of annoyance on her face.

“It’s no use, Arc. He’s too angry to rationalize with.”

Gramn’s hateful gaze shifted toward Ariane, though she merely beckoned him forward with a wave of her hand. A blood vessel pulsed in his forehead as he raised his battle axe and turned his attention to her.

However, I lunged forward and slammed my shield into Gramn’s chest before he had a chance. Ariane probably didn’t need the help, but my body reacted before my brain had a chance to catch up.

“Gyah, you stupid little...!”

However, Gramn was the leader of a Silver-Rank mercenary group and no slouch himself. He caught the attack with the long handle of his battle axe and rolled with it, pressing both hands to the ground to try to regain his balance. But Chiyome had managed to silently close the distance and caught him with a knee jab to the jaw.

“Gyaunngh?!”

The completely unexpected blow caused him to drop his weapon and slump into the wall of a house, completely unconscious. Chiyome stood up and glanced down at Gramn, his gaze blank and eyes rolled back into his head.

“When you lose yourself in your emotion and narrow your focus like that, it’s all too easy to get taken out.”

That was something only the truly gifted could say, of course.

I walked up to Gramn and tapped his cheek several times.

“Kyii!”

Ponta also summonsed several magical gusts of wind to help shake him out of it. With his hair blown back like that, Gramn looked like he was sitting in front of a blow dryer. After several moments of low groaning, he soon regained consciousness and tried to jump to his feet, but the tip of Ariane’s sword against his neck changed his mind.

“Damn you!”

Ariane returned Gramn’s glare with her own golden gaze. “You were as good as dead, you know. But instead, you’re alive. If you don’t understand the difference between these two things, perhaps we’ll have to let you sleep on it for a while longer.”

Gramn swallowed hard at the cold, calculated force behind Ariane’s words.

“You...you aren’t working with those masked scumbags?” he asked, rubbing his chin where Chiyome had landed her blow. He leaned back, as if finally ready to listen. I could only assume the masked scumbags he was referring to were the masked ninjas we engaged with earlier.

From the way he spoke, it seemed that there were more beyond those we met. Well, it made sense that no one would attack a whole city with such a small group.

“It was the masked men who did your companions in. There were three of them, and quite talented at that.”

His face distorted at that and he averted his eyes before clenching his fist and punching the ground, possibly out of anger at not being able to protect his men.

“Hey, there he is!!”

A group of ten or so men rounded the corner and spotted Gramn. A moment later, they spotted me as well and held their weapons up at the ready, looking fierce.

“You back off from our leader now!”

“Now’s your chance if you’re hoping for a painless death!”

Ariane looked increasingly annoyed at the appearance of the Black-Fanged Dogs. Lifting her sword ever-so-slightly from his neck, she gestured toward Gramn with her chin, prompting him to shut his men up or something to that effect.

Her forceful yet collected demeanor reminded me that she and Glenys were related.

“Stop, you guys! These aren’t our enemies! Lower your weapons!”

Then men hesitated for a moment despite Gramn's protestations. *That's right.* With Ariane pointing the tip of her sword at their leader's neck, they could easily assume he was being threatened.

"Ariane, wouldn't it be better to lower your weapon?"

Ariane frowned slightly at this but finally lowered her sword and looked at the members of the Black-Fanged Dogs. Following her lead, they also lowered their weapons in turn.

Gramn immediately stood up, grabbed his battle axe, and returned to his men.

"Boss! Those masked men are setting fire to the city!"

"We still don't have a full count of the monsters in the city, but we're hearing rumors about minotaur sightings!"

Gramn frowned at the reports from his men as he tried to think. We'd managed to avoid conflict with the Black-Fanged Dogs for the time being, but it didn't seem the turmoil throughout the city would subside overnight.

Ponta, now on my shoulder, twitched its ears in response to something. "Kyii?"

It didn't seem like anything dangerous was approaching. Chiyome suddenly appeared at my side, seeming to have figured out what it was.

"I hear a woman calling for help...oh."

She stepped forward to try to locate the person in question. At a loss for what to do, I glanced over at the Black-Fanged Dogs for a moment, but then quickly refocused and followed Chiyome in case I needed to act at once. Ariane also glanced at Gramn before spinning around, sending her cloak billowing behind her, as if she'd lost interest.

I returned my gaze to Chiyome's back.

"Is the woman close by?"

"Please wait a moment."

I couldn't hear the voice at all, but Chiyome kept walking ahead, raising a

hand to silence me. We stood there in silence for several moments, but even with all the screams echoing throughout the city, Chiyome was able to put her good hearing to use and pinpoint the voice's location.

Eventually, I was able to hear it too.

“An...one...is the...any...there!”

I could hear a voice, but I had no idea what they were saying.

Up ahead, I spotted a stone bridge across a stream that flowed through the city. However, there were no monsters or people on the bridge. All was silent.

“Is anyone there?!”

This time, I could clearly make out the woman's voice, followed by clanking and rattling sounds.

“This way.”

Without the slightest hesitation, Chiyome headed straight toward the bridge before hefting her petite frame over the railing and diving off. I hurried after her and looked over the side. It was a roughly three-meter drop from the top of the bridge to the riverbed below.

Chiyome stood in front of the entrance to a large sewage tunnel near the stone wall. Ariane jumped over the edge without the slightest hesitation and landed easily on the ground.

It smelled pretty bad, probably because the river carried with it the city's wastewater. It must have been hard for Ariane to be down there, and even more so for Chiyome, considering her keen nose, though they both seemed calm. Maybe they knew some way to turn off their sense of smell?

The entrance to the large underground tunnel in front of Chiyome was blocked by a sturdy iron grate. However, the gaps between the bars were quite wide, to allow the liquid to drain through without getting clogged.

On the other side of the iron grate were two women who were surprisingly well dressed, considering the circumstances. One appeared to be some kind of servant or maid—the kind you'd find working in a noble house, the hem of her skirt drenched from the water flowing through the sewer. The other was a

female knight decked out in an elegant, full-length shirt and pants of thick fabric, outfitted in armor protecting her chest, arms, and knees.

The two were clearly surprised at the sudden appearance of these figures who had literally dropped out of nowhere. I recalled encountering a similar scene back in the Rhoden Kingdom before.

“Who are you??”

The knight’s voice broke me from my reverie. She then ushered the maid-like woman behind her for protection. It looked like she was her guardian. Not that it mattered, seeing as the entrance to the sewage tunnel was blocked by a sturdy iron grate, serving as a physical barrier between us.

“We are mercenaries. We call ourselves the Turbulent Ponta Patrol.”

“Kyiiii, kyii,” Ponta also chimed in from atop my head.

She seemed at a loss as to how to react due to the combination of my flashy full-body armor and the furry animal sitting atop my head.

While the knight remained perplexed, the maid came forward to ask for help. “If you’re mercenaries, then is it possible to hire you right now?”

Looking away from the pleading eyes on the other side of the grate, I glanced toward Ariane and Chiyome. Ariane shrugged and let out a sigh.

“Honestly, I don’t think now is the time for us to be taking on mercenary jobs.”

The maid looked dejected at Ariane’s response.

“I think it would be best to get you out of there before we listen to the rest of your story. Do you have a key or something to open the grate?”

I looked at the iron grate in front of me. For some reason, it had a padlock on the inside and was constructed in such a way that it couldn’t be opened from the outside. I would imagine most people would enter the tunnel from the outside for purposes of maintenance and inspections, but if the lock was on the inside, it would only serve to keep people out. Perhaps it was meant to prevent suspicious people from entering?

The maid tried again, this time with a new request. “No, I don’t know

anything about the key. Could you at least contact the mercenary guild for me? Tell them it's a request from my mistress...no, the lord's wife."

Was she really a maid? It seemed odd she would wish to make a request of the mercenary guild in the lord's wife's name.

Unfortunately, that too was impossible.

"Sorry, the mercenary guild was burned down earlier and is currently out of operation."

The maid was surprised and confused upon hearing this. "What do you mean the guild was burned down?! You mean to tell me that the whole city was set ablaze and not just the castle?"

It was clear from both her actions and words that she had no idea what had happened here in the city of Rontestatt. Did this sewage tunnel secretly connect to the lord's castle? I recalled seeing something similar earlier, in the Rhoden Kingdom. Perhaps something unexpected had happened at the castle, and they'd used this emergency escape route to go seek the help of the mercenary guild. But the exit at this end had been locked and barred, and Chiyome just so happened to hear their cries for help.

"The city is in chaos right now. There are goblins, orcs, and other monsters everywhere, and also a mysterious group of armed men who are setting fire to the city. It will be quite a challenge to find any mercenaries to assist you."

Upon hearing my brief explanation, the maid slumped down as her knees gave way.

"By the way, did something happen at the castle?"

I received no reply from the dejected woman, who was still processing the gravity of the whole situation. Fortunately, the knight, possibly her escort, answered my question.

"A large group of bandits broke out of the castle's prison and are on the rampage. There aren't nearly enough guards at the castle to fend them off, and the lord's wife and the servants are in hiding. There's no telling how long they can hold out."

Apparently, there was trouble at the castle, too. With its command structure consumed by chaos, it seemed it would be a long time before peace returned to the city. Considering the timing of it all, and between the monsters, fires, and prison break, it seemed likely this was all the work of the masked operatives. It was quite an elaborate plan.

Suddenly, I heard someone call out behind me.

“Well, isn’t that interesting. So the lord needs our help?”

I looked back to see Gramn standing there, ankle-deep in the water, with a wide smirk on his face. Ariane and Chiyome, who seemed to have already noticed his approach, merely shrugged.

“Who are you?”

Gramn splashed through the river to stand in front of the knight.

“I’m Gramn, leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs mercenary group. We’ll take care of rescuing the lord and his wife. Of course, I assume you’re guaranteeing payment?”

The other members of his group, whom he reunited with earlier, began to jump off the bridge one at a time. The knight turned her gaze back to the maid, as if to ask her what to do. She looked at Gramn and his group of ten before, oddly, turning her gaze back to me for some reason.

After a moment, the maid swallowed and replied to Gramn. “Of course we will pay. However, the amount will need to be negotiated with my mistress.”

Gramn immediately barked out to his men. “Looks like we’ve finally scored ourselves a big job, guys!”

I cocked my head to the side and called out to Gramn just as he was about to leave the river and rejoin his excited men.

“Where are you going, Gramn?”

He sounded frustrated. “Huh?! We’re heading to the castle, obviously. Didn’t you hear a thing she said??”

“Of course I heard her, but wouldn’t this way be faster?” I looked back toward the underground sewer entrance. “The fact that they’re here must mean it’s

connected to the lord's castle."

The maid nodded quickly. "Yes, yes, that's right."

"Are you all stupid? Can't you see this giant thing right in front of you?!"

Ignoring the slightly confused maid and frustrated Gramn for a moment, I grabbed hold of the iron grate attached to the sewer entrance.

"Hmff!"

With a dull metallic clang, the fixtures attaching the iron grate to the sewer wall shattered. The points of connection to the walls of the iron fence and the sewer ditch broke, and the grate swung open with a loud creak.

Gramn and the other Black-Fanged Dogs all stared, wide-eyed and frozen in place. Rather than rip the grate right off, I'd figured I'd be a little restrained and show off my strength by just breaking the hinges instead.

The knight's calm demeanor finally gave way to a terrified look.

"There are still a lot of monsters running loose through the city, so perhaps this will get you to the lord's castle with minimal distractions."

Hoping to clear the stunned silence, I opened the iron grate up and gestured for Gramn to enter.

"You some kind of monster yourself?"

Still uncertain of my true intentions, Gramn sighed under his breath and led his men into the underground sewer.

The knight regained her composure and stepped in front of the group to lead the way. "I will guide you to the castle."

As I watched their backs, I suddenly felt someone tug on the hem of my cloak.

"Would you also be willing to help us?" The maid grasped tightly at my cloak, her shimmering eyes begging. Hoping to escape her gaze, I glanced toward Ariane and Chiyome.

Ariane sounded resigned in her response. "You should do what you want, Arc."

Chiyome nodded in agreement.

Ponta was busily amusing itself by constantly moving from my head to my shoulders. “Kyiiii, kyii.”

The real reason for my hesitation was that I didn’t want to get too close to any powerful figures in the empire. But it seemed the more I tried to avoid it, the closer I was pushed toward them. Perhaps it was just a harmful side effect of staying in one place for a long period of time. However, this might also be the shortcut I needed to get to Silver Rank—once the chaos in the city subsided, of course.

I glanced at the maid.

Her once-beautiful dress now looked quite pitiful, thanks to the awful stench and stains of sewage. Considering she had walked all this way through the sewage tunnel to seek help, I could hardly just leave her without doing anything.

“Hmm. In lieu of pay, we will agree to help you under the promise that the lord’s wife will promote us to Silver Rank at the mercenary guild.”

I was hoping to minimize contact with influential people as much as possible by sending my request straight to the lord’s wife, rather than the lord himself. It might be a useless distinction, but it made me feel better.

“Thank you, thank you so much! Well, then, please follow me!”

The maid, who had once sat so weakly in the sewage, was now back on her feet and full of energy. I didn’t know why she was suddenly so full of pep, but it was important, all the same.

Ariane and Chiyome returned their weapons to their sheaths and slipped past the entrance into the sewer tunnel.

“Wow, that smells truly awful. What a day this is turning out to be, huh?”

Ariane gently pulled up her cloak to cover her nose. Chiyome was nice enough to back me up, trying to smooth things over with Ariane.

“Once the chain of command is back in place, the lord will regain control over the city. So maybe it’s not such a bad idea to try to resolve this issue as soon as possible.”

I nodded in agreement with Chiyome, only to be met by an elbow to the ribs from Ariane.

“Well, let’s hurry up and get this out of the way. You said the bandits are rampaging through the castle, right? This includes some of the ones we caught before?”

According to the maid’s story, it certainly sounded that way.

“Unfortunately, I believe so. There’s quite a few of them. They aren’t particularly skilled fighters, but they did have sheer numbers on their side.”

“We went through all that work to transport them... If I knew this was going to happen, I would have just spared the leader and killed all his men.”

Chiyome and Ariane’s remarks were harsh, but I had to agree. If only we’d killed them back then...but it was too late for that now.

The maid looked back at us from where she walked at the front of our group, her eyes wide. “A mercenary group as yourselves captured all those bandits?!”

Judging by the excitement in her voice, the rumors about us had reached even the castle. I didn’t think we made it that far...

Suddenly, the maid stopped. Up ahead was a side passage that branched off the main tunnel, with another iron grate like the one we’d seen at the entrance. This one, however, was already open.

“This way.”

We followed her through the iron grate and then another wooden gate further beyond that. The damp wooden door creaked, the noise unexpectedly loud as it echoed through the chamber. At the end of the chamber was a stone staircase, which we climbed to find ourselves in a large room. Suddenly, I felt all eyes in the room rest on me.

Inside were Gramn and his Black-Fanged Dogs, the female knight who led them there, and other women dressed similarly to the maid—probably servants. Seated in the back of the room was an elegant woman dressed in a beautiful gown. This had to be the lord’s wife the maid was talking about.

To my surprise, she looked no older than her late twenties. Despite this

youth, and her makeup, she still possessed an aristocrat's force of personality.

"Heh, so you came too?" Gramn sounded annoyed. He was probably worried they'd get paid less due to our presence, but had no choice but to let the issue drop, given the situation.

"Well, I figured the more the merrier if we wanted this to reach a speedy resolution."

"Madam, I brought some mercenaries who have agreed to help us."

The maid stepped out in front of the lord's wife and bowed low before introducing us. The lady looked at me, Ariane, and Chiyome in turn.

"I just heard everything. The city is in a terrible state... Thank you for your efforts. So these are the mercenaries who will help save my husband and recapture the castle?"

She thanked the maid and then spoke to me. Under her deceptively long and delicate eyelashes, her sharp gaze bored into me.

"Have you no intention to remove your helmet and bow to me?"

Now that she pointed it out, I noticed that the Black-Fanged Dogs, even Gramn, had lined up and taken a knee. And then I remembered how we must look: a knight dressed in head-to-toe body armor, a female swordfighter covered completely in a cloak, and a young girl with a hat pulled down low over her head.

It was definitely not a good look in front of nobility. However, that didn't mean I could just give in to her demands.

Maybe I could play the nomadic mercenary card?

"We are neither from your lands, nor the empire at large, but we came here at the behest of your maid. Should you not need the assistance of such a slovenly crew, we shall make our exit."

A hushed murmur echoed through the room. The poor maid who'd guided us all the way here looked back and forth, fidgeting.

There were two reasons for the commotion. The first was our irreverent attitude toward the lord's wife. The second...

“You aren’t citizens of the empire?”

Everyone had to be at least somewhat aware that the unprecedented turmoil currently befalling the city was the work of their neighbor. To call ourselves humans (kind of?) from outside the empire naturally drew suspicion. However, this shifted their attention from our appearance and demeanor to our origins.

“We’re from the Rhoden Kingdom.”

To be fair, while I had come from the Rhoden Kingdom, I wasn’t exactly a Rhoden citizen. I folded my arms to show I bore no ill intent and set my feet firmly on the ground as I returned the lady’s gaze.

“So, should we go home? Or should we assist you?”

We would help, but not submit. Most aristocrats would be enraged at this, but she seemed different.

“Very well. As of this moment, recapturing the castle as soon as possible is of the utmost priority. So, what do you want from me?”

She was certainly a wise woman. In fact, she even wanted to get payment squared away first.

“All we ask is to be promoted to Silver Rank at the mercenary guild.”

This seemed to take her by surprise, but she agreed. “Very well, I promise you will be rewarded for your work.”

The lady looked at the female knight standing at her side. The woman stepped forward and gestured for Gramn and the rest of us to follow her down a narrow passage that dead-ended at a bookshelf. She pushed on one side of the bookshelf and rotated it out of the way, revealing an entrance into another room.

“Past this threshold is the castle. Your mission is to kill the bandits in the castle and rescue the lord. Oh, and please take this with you.”

She handed Gramn and myself a medal with a palm-sized family crest.

“It is proof of your identity to show the lord and other guards and servants remaining in the castle. All you need to do is explain that his wife gave it to you. Good luck!”

She offered a curt salute and returned to the secret passage, closing the bookshelf entrance behind us.

After seeing her off, I looked down at the family crest in my hand, figuring it was kind of like a security badge. I slid it into the leather bag hanging from my waist and looked around the room. It seemed we were in a relatively small study.

Alas, we didn't have time for a leisurely tour of the castle. I could hear a bestial roar, a scream, and the sound of clashing swords on the other side of the door.

Gramn shot a glance in my direction before barking orders to his men as they rushed out the door.

"Don't let your guard down, men! And don't let them steal our glory! Now, let's go!!"

It seemed he had unilaterally decided that we were competitors. But if he managed to actively contribute to resolving this issue, that was fine by me.

"I guess we should get going too?"

I left my sword sheathed on my back and held up my shield as I began walking. While the castle was nowhere near as small as a commoner's house, we were still indoors, and I'd have few opportunities to swing around a two-handed sword like the Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg. But against rampaging bandits, an armored fist or a smack from a shield would be more than enough.

Ariane placed her hand on the handle of her sword and listened closely to our surroundings. "We're not trying to capture them this time, right?"

Chiyome drew her dagger. "There are a lot more bandits than I expected."

Even without encountering any of the men in question, it seemed she had a general idea of their number from the sounds of fighting echoing through the castle.

"Kyii! Kyiii!!" Ponta mewed bravely and swished its tail back and forth as it patted my helmet to urge me on down a corridor, opposite from the direction Gramn went.

Further down the hallway and around the corner, I heard a woman's scream, followed by the sound of footsteps. Behind them, I heard a loud, inhuman cry rapidly approaching us. A moment later, a servant girl came tumbling out from around the corner, her legs caught up in her dress, followed by a shabby-looking man trying to dive onto her.

"Eeeeeek!!"

"Hyaaaaaar!!"

It was self-evident which one was the bandit here.

I readied my shield and quickly closed the distance, slamming the shield into the man's side. It connected with his chin and sent him flying back down the corridor before crashing into a pillar. With my strength, no normal human being would be getting back up from that blow for a while.

However, contrary to my expectation, the bandit immediately got up on all fours, like a monkey, and raced straight down the hallway toward us.

"Hyaaaaaaarr!!"

"What the...!!"

The man's eyes were bloodshot and foam dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

I smashed the bandit's hand with my shield as he lunged in close, then kicked him back into the hallway wall. He tried to get back on all fours again, but one of his arms was broken, leaving him unable to support himself. He resorted to crawling on the floor. But as he struggled to get back on his feet, Chiyome appeared out of nowhere and closed in on him before stabbing her blade deep into his neck.

Even then, his limbs still flailed, as if he were some kind of zombie on the warpath. The female servant he'd been chasing was so terrified that her teeth were chattering.

Finally, the bandit stopped fighting back against Chiyome and seemed to lose all his strength.

"Th-th-thank you," the woman said. It seemed as if she was simply too

grateful at being saved to question who we were.

Ariane closely inspected the bandit Chiyome had killed. “That was rather odd. There was something not quite right about him.”

Chiyome ventured a guess based on her previous experience. “I’ve seen something similar to this with drug addiction, but nothing this powerful.”

This whole situation kept getting more troublesome. When I first heard escaped bandits were rampaging around the castle, I thought they were just looting and ravaging whatever they found. I figured that once a fighting force entered the mix, the bandits would flee as soon as the situation was no longer to their advantage. Even if Aspania had released them, there was no reason they had to continue to occupy the castle.

If the escaped bandits were all drugged up, however, we wouldn’t be able to win back the castle until we’d taken out each and every last one of them.

“Hyaaaaaar!!”

A bestial growl echoed from the end of the corridor.

Ariane lunged out with perfect timing as the sound of multiple footsteps closed in, piercing the raving bandit’s heart the moment he rounded the corner. Even with his heart run through, however, she had to struggle to keep him at bay. Just then, a second and third bandit jumped out toward her.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!!”

“Ariane!”

I punched one of the bandits square in the face to keep him from reaching her. He rolled several times and I followed that up by stomping on him to crush the bones in his legs. The sounds of shattering bones filled the hallway, but it still didn’t stop him. His mobility, however, was greatly reduced.

The bandit who was roaring like a beast looked familiar to me—he’d been the leader of the brigands we captured. He didn’t seem to realize the person in front of him was the one who’d locked him up in the first place. It was hard to even call these things human anymore, with their teeth bared and spitting saliva everywhere.

I grabbed the former bandit's neck and twisted. There was a dull popping sound, and the man-beast dropped to the floor, unmoving.

Chiyome shook the blood off her dagger as she searched for her next target. "They can still be dangerous if you don't make sure they're dead."

Looking down at her feet, I spotted the headless body of a bandit.

"That's four down, but we've still got quite a few to go."

"Let's hurry up and get this over with."

Ariane, having finished off the bandit she was fighting, let out a sigh before dashing down the corridor again. Chiyome and I followed close behind.

We continued to slay the bandits as we made our way through the castle, although we also encountered a great many massacred servants and guards along the way. Not only had the rampaging bandits lost all their capacity for reason, but their physical strength was drastically improved, making it difficult for a normal human to defeat them in one-on-one combat.

The Black-Fanged Dogs might have suffered casualties too, as a result. Suddenly, I heard Gramn's angry shouts rising up from somewhere in the castle.

"Dammit!"

Ariane and I exchanged glances. Neither of us said a word as we rushed toward the voice, with Chiyome close behind.

I kicked a bandit who appeared in front of us out of the way and continued running until we found ourselves in a large, open hall featuring a wide staircase to the second floor. I spotted several figures on the dance floor at the base of the central staircase.

The first to draw my eye was a well-dressed middle-aged man. The next was Gramn, leader of the Black-Fanged Dogs, who stood in front of the man as if to protect him. Though he was accompanied by several other mercenaries, there were far fewer when we parted ways.

The middle-aged man Gramn was trying to protect was likely the lord. He looked terrified, though he was also screaming at Gramn all the while.

"Hey, do something! If I die, this city has no future!"

Gramn didn't seem to notice. He was focused on his surroundings, weapon in hand. The people he was so wary of were not the same feral bandits we'd dealt with before, but figures clad entirely in black cloaks and masks with prominent dark red circles on them.

Chiyome eyed the masked figures, her expression tense. "Are they connected to the people we met in the city?"

We couldn't just stand by and let the Black-Fanged Dogs handle this. It was evident from Gramn's expression that he and the lord were in an untenable position. Many of the escorts who should have been guarding them were now lying on the floor, bleeding out. Some even appeared to be members of the Black-Fanged Dogs.

There were about ten masked figures in total, but it would be difficult for the Black-Fanged Dogs to handle them all.

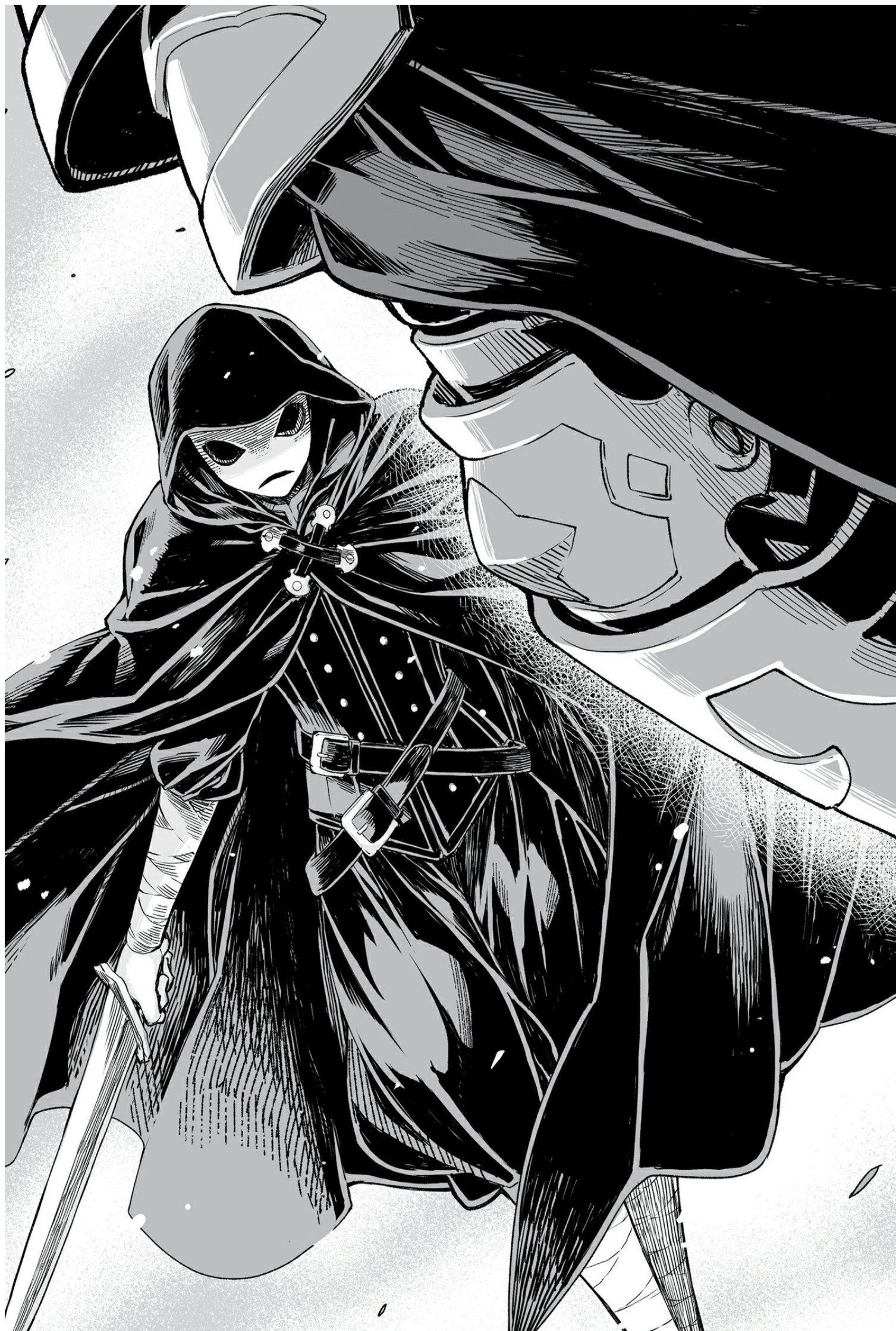
"We're here to help!"

My voice drew the attention of the masked ninjas.

I could use my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg here in the massive hall, so I drew the blade as I ran under the central staircase, followed closely by Ariane and Chiyome.

A number of the masked figures broke off to deal with us. About half of them were already armed. Three approached me, one with a longsword and two who were dual wielding short swords. Was I just the most conspicuous target, or were they purposefully trying to take out the member with the highest defense first?

In either case, I wasn't about to go down that easy. I managed to deflect the blows of the two dual wielders as they came in from my sides, and met the longsword wielder with an upward slash from my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg before he had a chance to strike. Unfortunately, he dove back and out of the way before my blade met its mark. He quickly regained his composure and launched into another strike. He was quite talented, body moving fluidly to match the flowing movement of his sword.



The men with the short swords struck quickly at my blind spots and deftly evaded my blade. They were in a similar predicament to me, however, as no matter how many times they managed to drive a strike right between the seams of my armor, they hit nothing but bone, only managing to make me feel slightly itchy and uncomfortable. They seemed confused as to how I was still moving.

I finally asked my masked opponent what they hoped to achieve during a lull in combat. “What are you doing here?”

Though I could sense his strength of will behind his mask, I received no reply.

...But that wasn't quite right, either. I could hear the muffled sounds of words seeping from behind the mask, but couldn't make out any of them. Before I had a chance to ask what he was saying, chunks of ice began to form around the man's longsword.

“Wha—?!”

Before I could even get a word out, the ice around his sword shot straight at me. I tried to pull my shield up in time, but misjudged their target: the ice chunks were flying toward my feet.

Numerous chunks slammed into me, but fortunately, my armor was strong enough to absorb the blow. However, the ice began to grow until my foot became part of a bizarre frozen sculpture, limiting my movement.

My opponents weren't about to let such an opportunity go to waste, either. The men armed with short swords launched in from both sides once again, while the man with the longsword closed in from the front.

“Ponta!”

“Kyii!”

I called out to the companion wrapped around my neck, and it quickly responded by summoning up a gust of magical wind to blast the men approaching from my sides. Even with its spirit magic, Ponta still wasn't quite strong enough to kill anyone.

However, the maneuvering room the blast of wind gave me was incredibly

useful in combat.

“Wyvern Slash!”

I took a step forward with my ice-encrusted leg and swung my sword, sending an invisible blade of energy flying straight toward the masked swordfighter in front of me. However, his training seemed to have paid off, as he was able to sense the danger and dive out of the way. That was the first time I’d ever seen that happen.

The energy blade cut through the banister running along the stairs, filling the massive hall with a loud roar. The lord, who was quite close to the blast, trembled in fear.

This seemed to have caught the masked group off guard, though it also left Gramn and his men taken aback. As the masked swordfighter moved back in, the other two men wielding short swords drew back.

We watched each other in silence for a moment before the masked swordfighter and I exchanged blows, sparks from our swords flying everywhere.

Glenys may have taught me how to handle a sword, but I was nowhere near as good as my opponent. I was only able to withstand his dynamic mix of slow and fast strikes, as well as the onslaught of intermittent blasts of ice magic, thanks to my mythical Belenus Holy Armor. However, it seemed his true intention was simply to buy time. The two dual wielders who had fallen back were making their way to the lord and his Black-Fanged Dogs escorts.

I called out to Ariane as I continued to meet my attacker’s blows.

“Ariane!”

She immediately took off toward one of the dual wielders, but found herself face to face with a masked ninja before she could get there. This masked man was much bulkier than the others and wielded a long club, which he swung at her with nearly impeccable timing, keeping her from getting any further.

She’d have no problem handling him if she could use her spirit magic. However, since humans couldn’t use spirit magic, and we didn’t want to reveal her identity as an elf, she was stuck unable to use her abilities for the time being.

Meanwhile, Chiyome was locked in fierce combat with a masked female swordfighter. This masked swordfighter wielded a curved sword, reminiscent of a scimitar. Despite its graceful movements and the way the woman easily handled the blade, it could strike a heavy blow, which caused a great deal of trouble for the spritely Chiyome, armed only with daggers. She tried to use her speed to her advantage, coming within inches of landing a blow.

This was the first time I'd ever seen her struggle in sword combat—other than when she trained with Glenys and Ariane, of course.

“Eyaaaaah!!”

“Guuaaugh!!”

Elsewhere, the dual wielders finally joined the battle against the Black-Fanged Dogs, laying heavily into the mercenaries and taking out one after another.

“Shit, shit, shiiiiit!!” Gramn, the leader of the group, screamed out as he fought viciously, swinging his battle axe around to drive the masked ninjas away from his fallen comrades.

There was not a moment to spare. Gram was surrounded by masked figures who were far more skilled than he, and it was only a matter of time before he fell too.

I would need to strike my opponent with a significantly powerful blow if I hoped to achieve anything. I swung my sword through the air as fast as I could toward the masked man before me, drawing two intersecting lines through the air.

“Wyvern Cross Slash!!”

An invisible cross-shaped blast shot toward the masked swordfighter. He managed to evade it, but only just—scraps from his cloak fluttered in the air where he once stood. Further behind him, one of the stone statues adorning the hall was shattered to pieces in a loud, dusty explosion that blocked my view.

I didn't wait for the smoke to clear before making my next attack.

“Wyvern Slash!”

I thought for sure I'd hit the masked swordfighter this time, but I heard the slash hit something, followed by what sounded like shattering glass. Apparently, he had managed to counter the blow with his ice fragments, causing the two attacks to cancel each other out.

But not entirely.

Sensing a moment of hesitation on my opponent's part, I lunged ahead. Gramn would probably be upset at being saved by a low-ranking mercenary, but I couldn't just stand by and watch him die.

The masked ninja struck me as I passed, but fortunately, my armor took the blow. I swung my sword in his direction to keep him at bay as I pushed on.

Up ahead, I spotted a masked ninja standing some distance away in the large open hall. There was something about them that made me feel uneasy.

"Open the gates and come forth from the other realm... Summon!"

A magic rune flashed on the floor in the center of the hall, and a dazzling light filled the room.

One after another, two-meter-tall magical wolves—otherwise known as haunted wolves—came running out of the light.

"Summoning magic?!"

I could use summoning magic myself, but this was the first time I'd seen it performed by someone else in this world. The fact that they had summoned monsters, rather than something more typical, suggested a lot about their ability to control said monsters.

"Awooooooooo!!!"

The haunted wolves could create illusory copies of themselves. In short order, the room was filled with a sprawling pack of the massive creatures. One dove at me, and I slashed at it, only to fly straight through as if I'd struck air. A moment later, another haunted wolf attacked me from behind and bit down hard on my leg.

"Gyaaaaaaaa!!!"

One of the Black-Fanged Dogs had just met his end. The haunted wolf bit

down hard on the man's throat, staining the hall with blood.

The odds were no longer on our side.

I blocked, slashed, and kicked at the incoming haunted wolves. Ariane and Chiyome were locked in combat with them, too. I kicked at an illusionary haunted wolf and then smashed the neck of a real one that lunged in before taking stock of my surroundings, realizing I hadn't been attacked by any of the masked ninjas in a while—at least not since the wolves' onslaught began.

Suddenly, I heard a high-pitched whistle, followed by two spheres flying through the air. Thick tendrils of smoke spewed from them as they landed in the hall, immediately blocking my view. I braced myself for another surprise attack, but all that came were more haunted wolves.

However, the smoke caused all the illusionary haunted wolves to disappear, allowing me to clearly make out the real ones as they approached. It also made it hard for the wolves to breathe, which was surprisingly beneficial to us.

Eventually, I could no longer hear the sounds of the haunted wolves' breathing. Silence fell over the hall once again. Apparently, the whistle had been a signal for the masked ninjas to withdraw.

I squinted through the haze and called out to my companions.

"Ariane, Chiyome...are you okay?!"

"I made it through in one piece."

"I'm okay too."

I was relieved to hear their voices through the hazy white smoke. These were some of the strongest enemies we'd fought yet.

"Gramn, are you all right?"

However, this time I received no reply.

As the smoke gradually cleared to reveal the entire hall, I was met with an awful sight. Numerous guards and mercenaries lay still on the blood-soaked floor among piles of haunted wolf bodies. At the landing of the grand staircase, I spotted Gramn kneeling, using his battle axe like a cane. At least that proved he was still alive.

However, I didn't see the lord behind him.

I called out to Gramn again as I walked up the stairs. "Gramn, what happened to the lord?"

He looked behind him, still in a state of shock. I followed his gaze, only to find a well-dressed torso...devoid of a head. Instinctively, I looked up toward the ceiling and let out a heavy sigh.

I'd thought they withdrew due to the heavy losses they were taking, but apparently, their mission had been to assassinate the lord the whole time. Once that mission was complete, they withdrew. This was quite the turn of events. I could only hope we didn't get thrown into the dungeon for failing *our* mission.

A deep sense of gloom washed over me as I considered our next steps, but I didn't have time for that now.

"Guaaaaa!"

I heard the loud, ferocious cry of one of the feral bandits still on the loose echo from deep in the castle.

"I guess we still have work to do."

I shook the blood off my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg and held it at the ready.

Epilogue

THE CITY OF RONTSTATT sat on the western border of the Great Revlon Empire. Until several days prior, the city had been swallowed by unprecedented chaos, suffering heavy losses as a result of multiple complex sabotage attempts believed to have been carried out by operatives of the neighboring Aspania Kingdom. In addition to the assassination of the lord and mass incidents of arson, a monster invasion caused further confusion.

Though things had settled down now, the citizens' ordeal was far from over. What was more, there was trouble brewing beyond the city limits. Rumors flying around town claimed that the imperial army had been severely weakened in a border clash against the Aspania Kingdom. A portion of the southern imperial army was recalled from other territories and put in charge of reconstruction and security.

As for us, we were summoned back to the lord's castle once the situation had settled down. After the masked ninjas withdrew, we subdued the rest of the ferocious bandits remaining in the castle, and provided a report, along with Gramn, about the situation to the lord's wife. I had fully expected her to blame us for failing to prevent the assassination of her husband. However, after listening to our report in silence, she told us that we would be contacted by the mercenary guild when the situation had settled down to receive our payment at a later date.

Though the mercenary guild's office had been burned down in the previous attack, the organization itself was still around. One of their former guild branch offices was now being used as a temporary headquarters.

This time, we approached the castle from the front gate instead of the emergency exits located in the sewer tunnel.

Upon showing the gatekeeper the medal with the family crest I had received earlier, I was easily granted permission to enter. A servant arrived shortly thereafter to lead us into the castle.

"Kyii," Ponta mewed at a familiar figure from its perch atop my shoulder as

we waited to enter the castle. Dressed in his usual black armor but lacking his usual battle axe, he stood there, waiting for a servant.

I was still carrying my Holy Thunder Sword of Caladbolg, as per usual. It might have been in bad taste to visit an aristocrat while armed, though the gatekeeper had said nothing about bringing my weapon in with me...

“You’re here too, huh.”

While Gramn finally acknowledged my existence, his voice was quiet and subdued, quite unlike his usual demeanor. Though he’d lost many members of the Black-Fanged Dogs in battle that day, not all his men had died. The mercenary group would survive. Obviously, they were still disinclined to be in high spirits, given the circumstances.

“Here to collect your payment?”

It was only Gramn, Ponta, and me here. I’d felt like it would draw attention to have Ariane and Chiyome along to collect our payment, so I’d only brought Ponta with me to the castle.

An uncomfortable silence fell over us for a while.

Eventually, an older gentleman who looked like a butler came forward and announced that he would escort us to the castle, where the lord’s wife was waiting. Gramn and I followed him in silence.

The room we were taken to was not the one behind the hidden door we’d previously visited, but a slightly larger audience hall. The lord’s wife, draped in a black mourning dress, sat atop a large chair in the center of the room. I detected no sorrow in her expression. Considering how many nobles married merely for politics, his death might not have affected her all that much, even if he was her husband.

“You have provided us with a great service. As promised, here are the rewards you requested,” the lady said in a light tone. She gestured with her chin to the maid who stood beside her.

The maid walked up to me with three silver tags on a tray made of polished wood—our new Silver Rank guild tags. Much to my surprise, the design was not that of a Third Rank, but a Second Rank, represented by two crossed axes.

The lord's wife seemed to read my mind the moment I looked up at her.

"There has been no mistake. This is a proper evaluation of your abilities."

She then instructed her servant to give Gramn his payment—a large leather bag filled with what sounded like money, judging by the clanking. He thanked her for the payment, but his voice was hollow.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted when the lord's wife called upon me. "Arc, would you and the Turbulent Ponta Patrol be interested in working for me?"

Even Gramn was taken aback by this sudden unsolicited offer.

"I'm very grateful for the offer, but I'm afraid we have plans to head to the imperial capital."

She didn't seem terribly offended by my response. "I see..."

Judging by her attitude, the offer hadn't been a serious one to begin with.

After confirming the final terms of our payment, our business at the castle was complete and we were dismissed. Not that it bothered me, to be honest. The castle still hadn't been cleaned up after all the chaos from earlier.

"Looks like you've made a name for yourself, Gramn." Guild tags in hand, I waved to Gramn to say goodbye.

"Hey Arc..."

There was something serious about his demeanor. I couldn't help but wonder what was going on with him.

Gramn scowled and ran a hand through his hair.

"Thanks for your help. I plan to use this regard to rebuild my mercenary group."

He fixed me with a determined gaze.

"This time around, I'm going to put together a mercenary group that's strong enough to protect my friends and hometown."

Apparently, he wanted to make his resolution clear not only to himself, but to say it out loud so everyone else knew it too. It would probably do him some

good to stop arguing with people all the time. Still, it had nothing in particular to do with me, so I offered up a simple reply.

“Well, I wish you good fortune on the field of battle.”

Just then something struck me.

“Hey Gramn, have you heard any rumors about any Hilk cardinals?”

I didn’t have high hopes—he was just the leader of a Silver-Rank mercenary group here in the western empire, after all—but I figured it couldn’t hurt.

Gramn looked confused by my question but put his hand to his chin to search his memories for a moment. “No, nothing in particular.”

That was pretty much what I’d expected. Aristocrats and other powerful people might know something about the cardinals, but I wasn’t in any hurry to ask the lord’s wife about the matter. With no knowledge of what kind of connections the Hilk had out here, it was unwise to be too open about these matters.

“Oh, right. I recall hearing that one of the cardinals is an incredibly beautiful woman,” Gramn added.

He probably meant it as an idle joke, but this was actually useful information to me. But just how “beautiful” was she, and how could we tell? Ariane and Glenys were both quite the lookers in their own right, and it was hard for me to imagine someone else even more beautiful than them. Perhaps it was all just a question of personal taste?

I thanked Gramn and we parted ways.

A short time later, I arrived at the town square where I spotted a tall, beautiful woman with a cloak pulled tightly around her and a petite young girl dressed in casual attire suitable for life on the road. I called out to them, and they quickly walked over to me.

“You’re back sooner than I expected.”

“Good job, Arc.”

I took out the Silver guild licenses I received from the lord’s wife and handed them over.

“Now we can finally leave the city.” I could clearly hear the emotion in Ariane’s voice as the silver guild tag glimmered around her neck.

Chiyome pulled the guild tag over her head as well. “There are no clear signs of the cardinals here.”

I told them what Gramn had mentioned to me earlier.

Vittelvarlay was the capital of the Great Revlon Empire. At its center sat the majestic Dyonborgh royal palace, and within that palace’s grand walls was a quaint little room in which an old man sat on a chaise longue covered in gold fabric, his brow furrowed in consternation. He had white hair, a long beard, and sharp hawkish eyes that glared down at the map before him.

The man let out a low growl. His name was Gaulba Revlon Selziofebs, and he was emperor of the Great Revlon Empire.

He had just received a report about what had occurred in Rontestatt, a city located along the western border. The Great Revlon Empire was currently being invaded by the Holy East Revlon Empire, which had already established a foothold in his territory. While the empire was arguing about how to deploy their armies to deal with this threat, they’d issued orders to gather as much information as they could about what was happening as the threat of further encroachment from the eastern empire loomed closer. And now they’d learned they were being invaded from the opposite direction—by the Aspania Kingdom, in the west.

The Aspania Kingdom had not set foot in the empire for many years. However, this sudden invasion seemed to be carried out in collusion with the eastern empire.

“Unbelievable as it is, could Aspania and the east empire have some kind of connection?”

Another figure in the room responded to the emperor’s booming voice.

“It seems so. However, it is unlikely they are working *closely* together, considering the vast distance between the east and west borders. In fact, Aspania only made its move after the east’s invasion stalled. Were it me, I

would want to move in coordination with my partner.”

The speaker was an attractive young man named Salwis du Ohst, mayor of the palace and consul to the emperor. The emperor nodded, seemingly convinced by the other man’s assessment.

“Aspania had nearly destroyed the border fort following their invasion. Why did they withdraw so quickly? The invasion may have stalled in the east, but they also haven’t retreated.”

The emperor glared further at the map, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening.

Salwis looked down at the map as well and voiced his suspicion. “Aspania may not be serious about invading our country. Their aim may be to prevent us from allocating all our strength to the east.”

The emperor scowled at this and folded his arms.

“Even if that is their goal, we can’t just ignore them in favor giving the eastern border our full attention.”

Unlike the eastern empire, nobles in the western empire had a great deal of autonomy. Even the emperor himself couldn’t easily move the entire imperial army around as he pleased. If he tried, the entire empire might dissolve due to internal conflicts of interest without the need for external threats.

However, it was undeniable that the east’s built-up momentum couldn’t be held at bay with their current forces. And that the empire would crumble if the east had the opportunity to divide and conquer each of the territories. They had no choice but to develop a strategy that involved fighting on two fronts, while driving back the east empire.

The emperor raised his sharp gaze from the map to look at the man standing next to him.

“Now, more than ever, we need the imperial inception formula. I want you to begin testing the efficacy of the secret medicinal herbs that go into it, while also collecting the necessary materials across the lands. We must make use of the precious little time we have while the east slumbers.”

Salwis bowed deeply and left the room to see to the details of his assigned task.

“One way or another, my generation will see to the reunification of the empire.”

Emperor Gaulba’s hawkish gaze fell once again to the map.

The border of the Aspania Kingdom served as a natural stronghold, between the mountains running to the southwest and the dense forest at the base of those mountains. The city of Alawesque was built right on this very land. Anyone who intended to travel to Foulabein, the royal capital of Aspania, would need to pass through this natural fortress.

A large military camp full of tents of all sizes and shapes was built next to the city of Alawesque, and a constant stream of soldiers moved in and out of the area. The powers that be in the empire would have been astonished to see that the soldiers coming and leaving from the military camp weren’t just humans, but also the so-called “mountain people”—the wolf and cat people known for their skills on the field of battle, and even the rabbit people, who weren’t as well known for their martial prowess.

But scenes like this were nothing special in the Aspania Kingdom. The country had taken a stance of coexistence between humans and mountain people for many years, and these campsites, where various races mingled, served as melting pots.

Despite being considered their nemesis for all these years, the Aspania Kingdom had never engaged in open hostilities with the Great Revlon Empire until their recent lightning strike on the border fort. They left the fort, and the armies within, half-destroyed before withdrawing with their symbolic victory.

Suddenly a strange group on horseback rode into the camp. Dressed all in black and disguised under their cloaks, these figures, who’d been the driving force behind the operation, were nearly unreadable, their expressions hidden behind their blank masks.

Soldiers cheered them on as they rode past.

Once they arrived at the entrance of the large tent at the center of the camp, two figures hopped off their horses while the others proceeded to the stables in the back to rest their mounts.

“Excuse me.”

The masked man announced his presence as he stepped inside, followed shortly thereafter by a masked woman. She stretched out her spine once they were inside.

“How did the operation go, Brad?”

The man speaking so casually to the masked newcomer was Quintil Aspania Gotis, the crown prince of the Aspania Kingdom. His dark gray hair was cut short, and a charming smile graced his fair cheeks.

The man took off his mask and knelt before his master. It was Brad, the blond-haired, blue-eyed leader of the Silver Blades mercenary group.

His real name was Brad von Clavis, firstborn to Count Clavis of the Aspania Kingdom and one of the four royal knights.

The woman standing next to him took off her mask and cloak before joining Brad to kneel before their master. Meel, chief of the Silver Blades, had tanned skin, black hair, blue eyes, and cat ears jutting out from the top of her head.

Her real name was Meel Olsen. Her family had served the Clavis for generations, and she now served as bodyguard to the count’s firstborn.



“A number of things did not go as planned, your Highness, but the assassination of Lord Rontestatt was a success. The former wife of the lord is now in control.”

Quintil nodded in satisfaction at Brad’s report.

“She is an ally we planted in that position many years ago. Rontestatt will remain an ostensibly imperial territory while it is actually under our control. The castle is surely running low on staff after all the chaos, so we should send as many of our own people as we can.”

The clerk standing at the crown prince’s side quickly rushed to put the ruler’s commands into action.

“And? You said things did not go as planned, but what happened, specifically?” The crown prince’s eyes, the same shade of blue as Brad’s, twinkled with curiosity.

Brad smiled wryly and spoke of the three strange people he met at Rontestatt while the crown prince listened with interest.

“I see. Perhaps they became involved during our plan to use the Summon ability to take the bandits rampaging throughout Aspania and send them to run wild in the empire and destroy their distribution networks and local stability from within?” Quintil chuckled to himself and encouraged Brad to continue.

“Yes. We had originally planned to capture the bandits who were sabotaging the attacks on surrounding areas ourselves for later use at the castle, but we had to hurriedly switch to transporting them, since they were captured much earlier than planned.”

Brad shrugged his shoulders in annoyance, eliciting a brief laugh from Quintil before he grew serious once again.

“So, do you think the medicine could prove useful?”

Brad frowned.

“It didn’t strike me as terribly useful. Anyone who took it began indiscriminately attacking anything and everything that moved.”

“Then why were those three still alive and able to fight you? Even after Meel

decided to get rid of them, due to the risk of them interfering with the operation?”

Meel broke her silence to answer the prince’s question. “We noticed they were coming and going from a mansion we had set up in the city to keep monsters in. Once we confirmed they had entered the mansion, we set it and the storage facility ablaze. However, they appeared the next morning as if nothing had happened. We had searched the mansion thoroughly for hidden passages and the like when setting up the storage facility, but came up empty. We have no idea how they got out of the building.”

She continued.

“Later, when we confronted them at the castle, I noticed the young girl is like me, while the other woman appears to be an elf.”

Brad looked surprised at this revelation.

“Is that true?! What are cat people and elves doing up in the western empire?”

The elves inhabited the southeastern corner of the northern continent, very nearly the opposite end from Aspania. What would they be doing in such a remote area, and hiding their identities at that?

“Hmm, they intrigue me. Are they still in Rontestatt?”

Brad shook his head. “According to the lord’s wife, they said they were heading toward the imperial capital.”

Quintil’s eyes glimmered at this.

“The capital? Well, isn’t that convenient. I want a way to keep in contact with the sisters who are infiltrating the imperial capital. This may be a good opportunity for the Silver Blades to find a new base of operations.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Regardless of what it is that they’re after, we want to ensure our relationship with them does not turn hostile. If they are of the races Meel suspects, then there may be room for discussion. Avoiding hostilities at all costs is imperative for the execution of future plans.”

After finishing his speech, Quintil looked at Brad and Meel.

“The Silver Blades will go to the imperial capital and continue to carry out our plans. I also want you to build a relationship with this so-called Turbulent Ponta Patrol and uncover their true identities and goals. Be careful.”

Brad and Meel bowed again at the crown prince’s decree.

“As you command!”

Afterword

THIS IS ENNKI HAKARI, the author of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 10 of this story. I really kept you waiting this time, but at least the book is finally out.

I truly cannot thank you enough for picking up this continuation of our journey. I know I'm repeating myself, but it really means a lot to me that all of you readers would wait for the next chapter in this story. I truly hope you enjoy it.

What's more, as luck would have it, the story of our favorite Skeleton Knight is getting turned into a TV anime and should be hitting airwaves shortly. When I first heard from my editor that an anime adaptation was being made, it didn't feel real. But as I sat in on the script meetings, voice actor casting, and more, I slowly began to realize that it really *was* going to become an animated series.

I was a bundle of nerves all through the process, worried every time I got a call from my editor that he was going to tell me the whole thing was canceled. Fortunately, it seems like we're finally going to make it to broadcast without any issues...and now I'm nervous all over again, wondering what you'll all think of it.

Oh, I'll tell you one thing now: seeing Ponta move around was really cute!

I guess now all that's left is for us to wait patiently until the air date.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of the people who helped make Volume 10 a reality. It's only through your efforts that this saw the light of day. To my editor, my illustrator KeG, and my proofreader—you have my eternal gratitude.

That's about it from me for now. If there is to be another volume of our beloved Skeleton Knight's story, I promise I'll get it out much faster than this one!

I hope to see you all again sometime!



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